A Poison Tree

by HLine

Summary

Now fourteen years old, Connor is a young man and ready to start taking his first steps towards becoming a Templar Knight. But things are not as clear-cut as he thinks, and on the eve of a revolution and with mysteries and questions appearing daily, he finds himself wondering if he truly knows as much as he thinks he does.
Meet the McCarthys Part 1

Ratonhnhake:ton grumbled as he was shaken awake. Batting away the arm that was doing the shaking, he sat up with a yawn and rubbed his eyes, shooting a half-hearted glare at his unrepentant best friend Kanen'to:kon.

"What is it?" he whispered, still waking up. Glancing at the door of the longhouse, he noted that it was early; only a few, weak rays of sunlight were creeping along the people sleeping on the ground.

"You're leaving today, right?"

Ratonhnhake:ton turned away from the other tribes' refugees lying on the ground to look at his friend.

"I was planning on it," he said. He had wanted to get up early to pack his bags so that he could leave in the morning and make good time back to New York. He had a lot of questions for his father when he returned to him.

Like what he had seen during the ceremony. And why he had collapsed during it, insensate to the world until the sun had long gone down and Oia:ner had tried everything she could think of to rouse him.

Unconciously, he reached up to touch the medallion that hung around his neck. The warm green metal, unlike any he had ever seen before, was as solid as ever beneath his fingers; a promise from father to son to always return home. Aside from the vision, Ratonhnhake:ton could not remember much of the day of the ceremony. The only thing, really, aside from the ceremony, that he could remember was the feeling of the skin on his chest that the pendant lay on blistering from the heat that it had suddenly started to radiate. When he had awoken, though, there had been no mark on his chest. Just a lingering sting that had faded completely by the next day.

Kanen'to:kon bit his lip and drummed his fingers on the edge of the pallet. His eyebrows were furrowed together in worry.

Sighing, Ratonhnhake:ton reached out and placed his hand on top of Kanen'to:kon's.

"Don't worry," he said, keeping his voice low so as to not disturb the others still sleeping, "I am feeling much better. I will not collapse off of Akweks on my way back to my father."

Kanen'to:kon didn't look reassured.

"It's not just that," he said, rubbing his thumb along Ratonhnhake:ton's, "I'm also worried..."

Oh. So it was like that.

Sitting up, Ratonhnhake:ton swung his legs over the side of the pallet and slid off.

"Come on," he said, patting his friend on the stomach, "let us talk outside without disturbing anyone else."

Outside, it was still dark. Some of the brighter stars were still visible in the sky, but in the distance, pale pink fingers were crawling along the horizon. Taking a deep breath,
Ratonhnhake:ton could taste the chill in the air, promising early frosts.

Outside of the walls of the village, the ground was damp from dew. Hares and mice scuttled through the undergrowth, squeaking and darting away as the two of them headed towards a large flat rock to lie on.

Lying back on the rock, Ratonhnhake:ton shivered a little and patted beside him.

"Come on," he said, smiling at his still-standing friend, "what is bothering you?"

Hesitantly, his friend shuffled forward. Ratonhnhake:ton waited patiently until Kanen'to:kon was lying down beside him, nervously tugging at his braids. Laying his own hands on his stomach, he settled in and waited for the other boy to speak.

"The woman," he said, after several seconds of silence, "the woman, that I saw in the vision, she said that I had to leave the village." Looking up from his nervously-fiddling hands, he bit his lip. "I don't want to leave the village. I don't want to have to walk amongst the white men and be called a savage."

Ratonhnhake:ton rolled onto his own side and reached out to still Kanen'to:kon's hands.

"Not all of the colonists will call you a savage," he said quietly, "Some people really respect us and our land claims."

"But not enough."

Ratonhnhake:ton pressed his lips together.

"No," he admitted, "not nearly enough."

Patting his friend's hands, Ratonhnhake:ton forced himself to smile.

"But let's not talk about that now. It's our last morning together! Let's do something fun!"

"I don't know..."

"C'mon, Kanen'to:kon," Ratonhnhake:ton said, sitting up, "do not let bad thoughts consume you. You will find people that will respect our culture and you." Standing up, he straightened his clothes and flashed him a smile. "I did."

"Yes, but everyone loves you."

Ratonhnhake:ton sighed at his pessimism and slouched dramatically.

"Fine then," he said, mock shaking his head, "I agree. Everyone you meet outside of the village will hate you and you will end up dying alone in a ditch."

Kanen'to:kon sat up, offended.

"Ratonhnhake:ton!" he cried.

"What?" Ratonhnhake:ton said, shrugging and not even bothering to keep the smile off of his face, "That's what you sound like."

Grumbling, Kanen'to:kon finally got up as well.
"You don't have to mock me," he said.

"Got you moving, though, didn't it?" Ratonhnhake:ton replied. "Now come on, lets see if we can get some fresh hare for breakfast."

Turning away, he moved to return to the village for his weapons when a tug on his sleeve made him stop. Looking back, he saw that his friend was holding the deer hide in a fist and staring at the ground, blushing.

"Wait," he said, his cheeks as red as the apples Ratonhnhake:ton sometimes ate in New York. "Let's not go back. Not yet."

Ratonhnhake:ton frowned, puzzled. Turning back towards his friend, he gently shook off his hand.

"Why not?" he asked, honestly confused.

Kanen'to:kon began to fiddle with his braids.

"Um, well, I didn't just wake you up about my worries," he said, shuffling his feet.

Faint trickles of worry began to worm their way through Ratonhnhake:ton's mind. What else could his friend have wanted to talk to him about? Leaning closer, he placed both his hands on his friend's shoulders.

"Kanen'to:kon, what is wrong?" he asked urgently, "You know you can tell me anything."

As he had spoken, the other boy had been getting steadily redder and redder, until something seemed to snap. He surged forward grasped Ratonhnhake:ton's shirt and pulled him in for a clumsy closemouthed kiss.

Ratonhnhake:ton's mind froze in surprise at the familiar feel of his friend's lips upon his. While they had done this many times before, it had usually been him who gave the first kiss, the first touch, the first gasp of pleasure. It wasn't until Kanen'to:kon's tongue traced his lower lip that he began to respond. Sliding his hands up, he cupped his friend's jaw in return and eagerly opened his mouth, slipping his own tongue out to meet Kanen'to:kon's.

It hadn't occured to him earlier, but thinking back, it was obvious. Of course Kanen'to:kon would be worried by the seeming end to their special relationship. What had started out as practicing kissing with each other two years back had eventually evolved into shy touches. Their leisurely explorations of each other while waiting for their snares to go off while hunting were precious memories to Ratonhnhake:ton, ones that he would treasure to the end of his days.

Pulling back, Ratonhnhake:ton licked his tingling lips, breathing hard. Looking into his friend's eyes, he could see that they were blown black with desire. Heat began to pool in his groin, and when Kanen'to:kon leaned back in to resume their kissing, he eagerly met his lips with his own.

They didn't, in the end, manage to catch any hares. Breakfast was not ruined, however, despite their failure. Several salmons that they had caught a few days before, smoked and accompanied with some late summer berries and cornbread made a perfectly good repast.

Licking the last traces of berry juice from his fingers, Ratonhnhake:ton crouched down and rubbed his chin, glancing over his belongings that he was taking back to New York. He knew that he should have packed them the night before, but there had been a celebration for the harvest beginning, and it had slipped his mind.
He had already packed the small knick-knacks and gifts that he had collected for his friends in the city. For the servants, there were several small carvings and shells; little things that could be placed by one's bed or carried around in a pocket. A particularly fine carving of a mother bear and her cubs was set aside for Mrs Potts, the head maid. A new pipe for Mister Thomas, a bullet pouch for Uncle Charles, some obscure stories that he had written down for Mister Johnson and finally, his crowning achievement of the summer, a black bear pelt for his father.

Grinning, Ratonhnhake:ton couldn't help but pet the pelt a little. None of the others his age were even close to being able to claim that they had managed to kill a bear with only a knife, and when he had walked back into the village with the still-dripping hide tucked under one arm, he had drawn awed stares.

The meat from the bear had also been appreciated. With the refugees from the other Kanien'ka:ha villages being forced to stay in the village with the encrouching autumn and winter, any amount of extra food was appreciated, Ratonhnhake:ton knew.

Ratonhnhake:ton frowned as he was reminded of their sister clans. With the longhouse emptied as the adults went about their work, it was easy to ignore, but this winter would be hard for his people, having two villages' worth of people forced into one. He was almost glad that he was leaving and lessening some of the pressure on his peoples' food stores. Perhaps when he returned home, he could let his father know, or Mr. Johnson. They were always looking for ways to better relations with his tribe, even with him being a member, and sending the tribes some food might help.

Well, if he wanted to talk to them, he'd first have to return to New York. Rubbing his eyes, he turned back to his things.

Clothes on the bottom, with the smaller presents tucked between the layers. The set of throwing knives that he rarely used were next, and finally, his food for the road on top.

Tying the saddlebags shut and weighing them in his hands, he smirked. Perfectly balanced, as ever. He may have been upset the first time his father had sent him back to his village, convinced as he was that his father hadn't wanted him, but Ratonhnhake:ton had to admit, the trips had given him a lot of experience in packing bags. Hauling them over his shoulders, he walked out of the longhouse into the morning light.

Heading towards his horse, Akweks, he nodded as he passed the women working in the fields. They were lucky that they were able to expand the fields with all the extra hands, but still, the men pretty much had to all be out regularly to hunt for meat. This was why it was so surprising when he reached his horse and found his uncle waiting for him.

The older man, his hair pulled back in its usual tight topknot, was absentmindedly petting Ratonhnhake:ton's dark bay Barb, scratching along the ridge of his mane and making absent-minded soothing noises as he stare into the distance, his brow furrowed in worry. As Ratonhnhake:ton drew closer, the older man blinked slowly and turned to look at the boy.

"Ratonhnhake:ton," he said gravely.

"Uncle," Ratonhnhake:ton replied, nodding at him. "Are you leaving now?"

Otetieni nodded and gave Akweks one last pat before stepping back and allowing his nephew to start attaching the saddlebags to the saddle.

"Yes," he said, "I have to discuss feeding our guests through the winter with the other clans. We can't keep hunting so much; it's depopulating the forest."
"And the raiders?"

Otetieni sighed and rubbed his face.

"Them too. They aren't acting like the colonists usually do, and it's worrying the rest of the tribes."

Ratonhnhake:ton stopped in mid-knot with the second bag to stare at his uncle quizzically. Colonists not acting like colonists?

Otetieni noticed the look and sighed again before leaning forward.

"I know that you will tell your father this," he said, "but I must ask of you not to. Not right away."

He raised a hand to forstall any complaints. "This is our issue, not your father's, and not his organization's. Let us deal with it." He punctuated the end of his sentence with a glare, making Ratonhnhake:ton shrink back reflexively.

Running his hand over his head, the older man looked away.

"The scouts that we have sent back to look at our brothers and sisters' attackers have returned with strange stories. Rather than settling down and building their small houses, the raiders move on almost as soon as they are done burning villages. They take prisoners but don't sell them. The ones we have managed to free tell stories of being interrogated for the location of some strange treasure."

"Then they are madmen, looking for gold like colonists always do," Ratonhnhake:ton said, shrugging.

"No, Ratonhnhake:ton," his uncle said, looking strangely old and tired, "I fear that it is not just one group of madmen this time. Their are too many attacks in too many places at once. This is more than one small group."

Ratonhnhake:ton frowned, but did not resist and his uncle grasped his chin and forced him to look him in the eye.

"Remember, Ratonhnhake:ton," he warned, "not a word to your father. I won't have this used against us in negotiations."

Ratonhnhake:ton pressed his lips together. But his father could help, he wanted to say. Why would his people not accept his father's organization? They simply wanted peace for everyone, so that no one had to fear having their land stolen or being killed.

His uncle gave him a warning look, and Ratonhnhake:ton clenched his jaw. Saying the words felt like spitting out a slug.

"Yes, Uncle."

Finishing tying on his saddlebags, there was nothing else keeping Ratonhnhake:ton there. He waved goodbye to his uncle and set off out of the village. He was just cresting the top of the valley when a pinecone hit him in the back of the head.

Hissing and rubbing the back of his head, Ratonhnhake:ton looked around for the thrower with one hand on his tomahawk. With all of the attacks on his people lately, he knew that he had to be ready for any amount of trouble that a lone native could get into on the road. He didn't have to look far, though, as he quickly spotted Kanen'to:kon, laden down with his own packs, perched in a tree above him. Relaxing, he turned Akweks around to better face his friend.
"Could you not find a better way to get my attention?" he asked, grinning.

Kanen'to:kon returned his smile with a small, hesitant one of his own. Slipping off of the branch, he hit the ground with a thump before walking over to Ratonnhake:ton.

"Maybe, but I needed to catch you before you left the valley."

Reaching out, he gently stroked Akwes' neck. The dark bay horse snuffled and turned, lipping at his hair. Ratonnhake:ton couldn't help but smile at the sight of Kanen'to:kon sputtering and trying to move away before he lost a chunk.

Taking pity on him, he pulled on the reins, forcing the Barb horse to arch its neck.

"Peace, peace," he murmured, patting the horse's neck, "you shouldn't eat Kanen'to:kon's hair. Even if he could stand to lose a little." He shot a grin as his friend as he tried to straighten his braids.

Sniffing, Kanen'to:kon patted down his front as Ratonnhake:ton slid off of his horse.

"Alright then, you caught me," he said as soon as his mocassins hit the grass, "now what was it that you needed to talk to me about?"

Kanen'to:kon slid his bag off and began to dig through it.

"Well," he said, "you were leaving and so was I, and we may never see each other again, so-"

"Don't say that," Ratonnhake:ton said, crouching down in front of his rambling friend, "of course we'll see each other again!"

Kanen'to:kon's shoulders jerked, as if he had been struck between the shoulderblades by a rock, and he momentarily stilled. Ratonnhake:ton barely had time to note this strange behaviour before something was being shoved into his chest. Scrambling, the item nearly fell out of his hands twice before he got a good grip on it.

"I made this for you!" Kanen'to:kon cried, jumping up, "So that you don't forget me. Us. The tribe." He was rambling, nervously tugging on his braids and shuffling his feet as he stared at the forest floor. Holding the item in front of him, Ratonnhake:ton was shocked to realize that it was a necklace of bear claws, each one separated by a single bead and strung on a leather cord.

"I, uh, thank you," Ratonnhake:ton said, holding the necklace up to the light. A mark on one of the claws caught his eye.

"Are these from the bear I killed?" he asked. The small nod confirmed it. Ratonnhake:ton marveled at the notch in the claw that had caught his eye. He had caused that with his knife, nearly having the weapon torn out of his hand as the bear took a swipe at him.

Reverently, he pulled the necklace over his head and settled it so that the claws were centered over the dip in his collar bone. In the late summer sun, the claws were a rich, creamy ivory, set apart from each other by brightly-coloured beads with traditional patterns carved onto the surface. Pressing a hand gently over top of it, Ratonnhake:ton could have sworn he felt the warmth of the emotions put into the making of the necklace radiating against his hand like sunlight.

Looking up, he grinned shyly.

"How does it look?" he asked.
A soft, sweet smile spread across his friend's face in return.

"Really good."

Patting at it and glorying in the feel of the smooth claws underneath his fingers, Ratonhnhake:ton shuffled his feet and looked back at his friend. Kanen'to:kon was tugging slightly on his braids nervously and biting his full lower lip. Frowning at the nervous tics, Ratonhnhake:ton let the hand that had been stroking his new necklace fall to his side as he reached out and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Kanen'to:kon," he said, "you are acting strangely. Are you still worried about leaving the village?"

The other boy's fingers stopped in their fondling of his hair. He glanced briefly into Ratonhnhake:ton's eyes before looking away again.

"I-I," he stuttered, hesitating, before plunging onward, "yes, I am still worried. About that. If I'll fit in or not with the other warriors I'm to learn from."

Raising an eyebrow, Ratonhnhake:ton let out an amused huff.

"Then I'll repeat myself: don't worry," he said, hunching over to catch Kanen'to:kon's eyes. "The spirits would not send you to a completely hostile place."

Kanen'to:kon still looked nervous, despite his words. He struggled to keep from rolling his eyes. Sometimes, for all that he loved him, Ratonhnhake:ton had to admit to himself that his friend was a total worry-wart. At the rate that his friend was going, he would never leave the valley! Casting about, he tried to think of something that would perhaps calm him down enough that he would actually leave the valley.

Then it struck him. Turning back towards his horse, Ratonhnhake:ton thrust his hand into a saddle pack, carefully avoiding the knives that lay near the top to get at the clothing that lay underneath. Briefly rubbing the different pieces of cloth between his fingers, he quickly found what he was looking for and pulled it out with a flourish.

"Here," he said, turning back to Kanen'to:kon, "a gift for you as well!" Holding it up proudly between two hands, Ratonhnhake:ton was quick to place the cloth around his friend's neck and tie it in a knot. Once it was done, he proudly clapped a hand on the other boy's shoulder.

"There," he said, "now if you get worried again, you can just touch it and remember my words."

Blinking, Kanen'to:kon reached up to touch the cloth that had been wrapped around his neck. Ratonhnhake:ton smiled as he tucked his chin to his chest and pulled the loose ends out to closer inspect the blue fabric. A deep rich blue with small embroidered red crosses at the ends, it had been a gift from his father two years previously before he had left to spend the summer with his people. The more he thought about it, the more Ratonhnhake:ton liked it. He had had the piece of cloth for as long as he and Kanen'to:kon had been aware of their feelings for each other; it was appropriate for it to be given to his friend when they were leaving to become men.

Biting his lip, Kanen'to:kon looked up at Ratonhnhake:ton through his lashes and let his hands drop down in front of him, wringing them anxiously.

"Thank you," he said, his voice oddly soft, "I will remember that."

He still looked lost, though. Reaching out, Ratonhnhake:ton covered Kanen'to:kon's hands with his
own, stilling them. Leaning forward, he placed a soft, chaste kiss against Kanen'to:kon's slightly chapped lips. Pulling back after a second, he pressed their foreheads together.

"You will be fine, Kanen'to:kon. You will learn from these other warriors, and you will come back and protect our people with me."

Letting go, Ratonhnhake:ton turned and mounted his horse, settling back into the saddle. A quick glance up in the sky showed that he still had plenty of time to travel.

"You will be a great warrior, Kanen'to:kon," he said as he turned Akweks to face down into the next valley, "and you will never be alone." Akweks began to dance, eager to get going. Twisting in his saddle for one last word, Ratonhnhake:ton said, "'If the warriors let you, come visit me in New York!' he said, "Go to the Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhatten and ask for the Kenways; they'll tell you where to go!' And then Akweks could be held no more, and with the wind running through his hair, Ratonhnhake:ton began the long journey back to his father.
Ratonhnhake:ton could smell New York before he saw it. The thick stench of unwashed people, animals, and that indescribably stink that followed any great concentration of people around was thick enough to chew, and left an oily layer on top of his tongue.

Grimacing, he pinched his nostrils shut to keep from sneezing. For all that Ratonhnhake:ton loved his father and his uncles, he did not always enjoy living in the city the way they did, and not just for the stench.

"Oi, you, stop where you are!"

This was one of the other reasons.

Keeping his face still despite the surge of irritation at being stopped, Ratonhnhake:ton glanced over his shoulder. It wasn't a big group of soldiers; only a three-man squad, make up of two regulars and a grenadier. They were stalking towards him with gleaming eyes, the two regulars in particular eying his bulging saddlebags.

"Yes?" he asked the soldiers, trying to keep his voice a level as his face.

"Where'd you get that horse of yours, boy?" asked the lead regular. Behind him, the grenadier hauled his axe up to rest on his shoulder in a transparent warning.

Still, Ratonhnhake:ton felt that he should try to defuse things.

"It was a gift from my father," he stated, keeping a close eye on the men.

The speaker snorted and glanced at his two fellows.

"Really? A gift," he sneered, stepping forward. "Now why do I find the idea of someone giving a savage like you a gift like that so impossible?"

Ratonhnhake:ton narrowed his eyes and pulled on Akweks' reins, making her dance away from the man. Despite his father's lessons on self-control, he could feel his anger rolling to the forefront, as unstoppable as a wave on the ocean.

"I am not sure," he snapped, "perhaps you are simply stupid."
The man snarled and lunged at him.

Lashing out, Ratonhnhake:ton kicked him in the face, sending him reeling back, howling and clutching his now-bloodied nose. His friends snarled and pulled out their own weapons, brandishing them at him. Ratonhnhake:ton growled back and pulled out his knife, knowing that he would be able to take them in the ensuing fight, when the sound of drumming reached his ears. Glancing back down the road away from the city, he could see the red uniforms of another group of regulars marching along.

He growled under his breath. As he was, with most of his weapons still in his bags, he wouldn't be able to defend himself well enough against so many enemies to avoid injury.

So with that in mind, he turned back and dug his heels into the Akweks sides. With a whinny, the dark bay horse reared and shot forward, sprinting away into the bush lining the road as the soldiers shouted uselessly. Crashing through the undergrowth, he guided Akweks as best he could to avoid injuring her as they distanced themselves from the soldiers. Ratonhnhake:ton knew that they would probably try to follow, even if it was just to satisfy their wounded pride, but he was confident in his forestry.

His confidence was well founded. As the sounds of the soldiers' shouts faded behind him, Ratonhnhake:ton slowed. Glancing up, he took in the position of the sun, trying to figure out where he was. It was lucky that it was still early in the morning; it was easier to orient himself that way. As the roads had proven themselves to be dangerous for him, he might have to continue the last little bit of his trip in the woods.

All around him were tall oak and maple trees, their leaves just beginning to change colour. A squirrel jumped through the branches above, making the leaves rustle, and Ratonhnhake:ton could hear something running through the undergrowth.

Surrounded by the peace of the wilderness, a great sadness welled up in his chest. It hit him, then, that this would be the last time in a long time that he would be Ratonhnhake:ton. He was a man now, with adult responsibilities. He would work for his father and his uncles now, to make the world a better place, and that would most likely mean a stop to the visits to his village. And as the soldiers had shown, Ratonhnhake:ton was not welcome in New York.

No, he thought heavily as he slid of Akweks, Ratonhnhake:ton would have to go away now; only Connor Kenway could walk the streets unmolested.

Leading Akweks into the bush, he tied her to a tree a little ways away from the road and pulled out his colonist clothes. Connor's clothes. Laying them over the bushes, he ran an eye over the fine cloth before pulling off his deerhide shirt. An ivory-coloured spun shirt was the base of the outfit, finely-woven so that it was soft to the touch. His father had brought it last winter during one of Connor's growth spurts, and pulling it over his head, Connor found a small bit of amusement and comfort in it's tight fit over his shoulders. His father had given it to him for one growth spurt, and here Connor was, needing another one as soon as he went home! Or at least, having the seams let out a little. Casting his mind back, he was fairly certain that Ellen had said that she had made it so that it could be easily altered.

The reminder of his friend helped push back the darkness that had infested his mood. Not all colonists were like those soldiers, he reminded himself. Ellen and her daughter Maria had always been kind to him. His uncles, too, were kind as well. Master Pitcairn and his family were always welcoming when he visited; Master Johnson was kind as well, always making a point of speaking to him in his mother's tongue. Even Charles Lee, with his terrible temper, would always let him play with Spado when he visited and advise him on how to best prepare himself to be a Templar.
Knight. And of course, there was his father, who had taught him so much over the years that he would never be able to pay him back.

Yes, while there were those that looked down upon him for his mixed blood, there were plenty more who were kind and caring.

Pulling on his blue embroidered waistcoat and trousers, he finished off his transformation into Connor Kenway by tying back his hair into a queue with a red ribbon. His moccasins were stored in his bags and replaced by a sturdy pair of boots, and then he was sliding back into the saddle.

Visiting Ellen would help his mood, as would seeing his father. Straightening his posture in the saddle and digging his heels into Akweks' sides, Connor began to pick his way back to the main road.

In the city proper, sitting stiff-backed on top of Akweks, he weaved his way through the crowds of people on the roads. Their chatter bounced off the large houses and businesses that lined the streets, towering above them all. Listening with only half an ear, Connor could pick out complaints about drunken husbands, debates over the prices of eggs, and rumblings about the Regulars in the city. Apparently, there had been a rash of burglaries, and several of the victims swore that they had seen men in red uniforms fleeing their house as they came home. As a patrol passed by, marching in step to their drummer's beat, Connor carefully kept his face still. He could believe that theory. The Regulars were paid poorly if at all, and many were not the types to let a little thing like crime stand in their way of turning a profit. His experience that morning had certainly shown that, he thought darkly.

As he travelled further, the buildings that lined the streets became shabbier, almost like they were reflecting his mood. While the people in these streets were still clean and neatly clothed, there was a veneer of dirt that still seemed to cover the neighbourhood and its inhabitants as a reflection of its relative poverty. People were louder, shouting their specials of the day at passerbys and their opinions to their friends. They were drunker too, with men and women waving bottles around as they staggered past him, despite how early it was. Connor was practically crawling through the crowd now, trying not to hit anyone. He did not want to get attacked for hitting someone's drunken friend.

Sometimes, he wondered why Ellen did not move to a better part of the city. She certainly made enough to afford a better shop; she was the most talented tailor Connor's father said he had found in the colonies. Moving would also allow her to attract better customers. She had spoken repeatedly of wishing to do more than just sewing up the seats of drunks pants and letting out seams for children. He could still remember how her face had glowed the first time his father had commissioned a suit from her. She had adored the challenge to her skills.

A sharp jolt as a drunk staggered into Akweks' side jolted him out of his thoughts. Quickly turning to check that his saddle-bags were still unmolested, he tightened his lips. It was people like that that kept her from moving. Or rather, one person in particular. Her husband, Quincent.

The man was a nightmare. She had complained repeatedly about him helping himself to her profits so that he could go out drinking, ignoring his daughter Maria and his wife, then staggering back home and insulting her customers. Insinuating that she was getting money from them another way and smearing her reputation across the city. Regardless of whether or not the people believed him, his constant abuse had people avoiding her shop and going to less talented seamstresses, just so that they would not be asked how much Ellen was charging for a night.

Connor gripped his reigns a little tighter. Oh how he wished that he had punched the man in the face the first time he had figured out what he was asking! He nearly had, with only his father's hand...
on his shoulder stopping him. His eyes had been dark and stormy as he had stared Quincent down, though, and Connor knew that he had been restraining himself as well.

"Please, please!" someone shouted up ahead, their voice high and cracking, "Please, someone help! Mommy's hurt!"

The voice was familiar. Taking a chance, Connor pressed his heels into Akweks' sides and sped up a little towards the voice.

"Mister Connor!"

It was Maria.

The little girl's appearance was the first thing that gave him the idea that something was wrong. Usually, she was neatly dressed, with a little bonnet and apron over a clean if threadbare dress, the mark of a loving and proud mother. Right now though, she showed no mark of her mother's care. Her bonnet was gone completely, exposing messy brown hair that hung in a pair of loose braids, with more hair outside of the braids than in them. Her apron and dress were filthy as well, covered in dust and dirt just like her red, tear-streaked face.

"Mister Connor!" she cried again, reaching up towards him, "Mister Connor, please! Mommy's hurt!"

Alarm spread through his limbs. Reaching down, he grabbed the loose scruff of her dress and hauled her up into the saddle.

"Which way?" he asked as she wrapped her chubby arms around his middle, sobbing.

"Towards home!" she gulped, "She's been like this for hours!"

Digging his heels into Akweks' sides, he lurched forward into a brisk trot. Hours. That did not sound good.

In front of him, Maria had dissolved into blubbering incoherently and waving in the direction of her home. Her face, already flushed and tearstained, steadily reddened and dampened until she resembled nothing more than an apple that had been dipped in water. As they finally reached her home with her mother, Connor got off of Akweks and tied him to the post in the back before sweeping the little girl into his arms and holding her close as she sobbed.

Knocking at the back door brought about no answer. Connor could hear his knocks echoing in the house, but there was no sound of Ellen coming to open it for him. The knot in his stomach was as tight and dense as a cannonball, and it dropped to his feet as he tested the doorknob to find it open.

The house was silent. Closing the door behind him quietly, he tucked Maria's head under his chin. She was gulping for air and whimpering, rubbing at her cheeks with her dirty hands. As he stepped further into the house, she buried her face into his shoulder.

Normally, Ellen's house smelled like tea and the flowers that Maria brought her during the summer, a sweet smell just barely covering the stench of alcohol that Quincent trailed behind him like a slug. Now though, as he entered the kitchen, the sharp, sickening stench of blood greeted him like a slap to the face.

Just by the turned over kitchen table, scrubbed as smooth as velvet over the years by many a careful hand, lay Ellen.
Connor gasped as if someone had punched him in the stomach at the sight of his friend. Allowing Maria to squirm out of his arms, he dropped to his knees to feel for a pulse, pressing again and again his fingers to her wrist.

Ellen lay crumpled on her side on the floor like an animal caught in a snare, her skirt rucked up obscenely around her waist and her head surrounded by the broken shards of dishes. Her kind face was nearly unrecognizable, swollen as it was, and blood had trickled from her nose and her mouth to puddle underneath her cheek. Connor could see the imprints of knuckles on her cheekbones, dark blue and purple that were set off by the green fingers still wrapped around her neck. Further bruises peeked out around her wrists and thighs, more purple and black smudges broken by what looked like teeth marks, as if some wild animal had set upon her and attacked her.

But Connor knew that it was no animal that had done this to her. With his hands shaking with anger and worry, he finally found a weak, unsteady pulse in her wrist.

Letting out a breath that he didn't know that he was holding, he turned to look at Maria. She was standing behind him, her eyes wide and startlingly white in her damp red face, her lips pressed tightly together and her chin wobbling with the effort of keeping back her cries.

"Maria," he said, and winced at how she flinched back at his tone, trembling like a baby deer.

"Maria," he said again, stomping down his rage. "Maria, your mother needs a doctor. Do you know where one is?"

The little girl shook her head frantically, fisting her dress in her small hands and looking down at the floor.

Connor bit his lip and looked back at Ellen. She was breathing, but that was about it. His attempts to find a pulse hadn't stirred her, and he knew from his brief lessons with Dr. Church that being unconscious for a long period of time was not very good. He didn't know how to treat such things. They needed a doctor.

Carefully pulling down Ellen's skirt so that she was not exposed to the world, he then turned to grasp Maria's shoulders.

"Maria," he said, "I am going to go and get a doctor. I need you to stay with your mother and make sure that she is alright." Connor searched his mind to figure out what she could do while she waited. Glancing around the room, he spotted several ripped bolts of cloth in a corner. Turning back to Maria, he gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

"Maria," he said, trying to smile reassuringly, "while I'm gone, get your mother a blanket. She has been lying on the ground for a while and is probably cold." A lecture, drunkenly slurred at him one night while waiting for his father to finish his business with another one of his uncles, swam to the forefront of his mind. "Do not get her a pillow, though," he said firmly, looking Maria in the eye, "she may have hurt her neck, and a pillow may align her neck wrongly."

Maria nodded shakily, her eyes darting between him and her mother. Giving her a gentle shake, he had her repeat his orders back to him before rising to his feet, satisfied.

"I will return shortly," he said to the little girl as she began to run up the stairs, "do not worry."

The sun was high in the sky as he darted out of the house. Akweks was still where he had tied her, and he quickly untied her with shaking fingers before jumping into her saddle. Digging his heels into her sides, he nearly had her gallop to the nearest tavern, no longer caring about possibly
running someone down. The sun was still climbing in the sky, but it was still late enough in the day for the tavern to have plenty of patrons looking for lunch before going back to work.

If Ellen had not been so badly beaten, he would have gone to Dr. Church, despite him living on the opposite side of the city. As it was, though, he was far too far away and too ornery to come to a poor woman's house for treatment. His best bet then, was one of the more local doctors, who often could be found in the nearest drinking hole, hoping to treat the victims of inevitable barfights.

He burst through the door, drawing a few looks as he elbowed his way through the lunch crowd to the bar.

"Sir!" he cried to the bartender, "Is there a doctor here?"

The bartender glanced over at him from where he was handing out a pair of beers to a customer. He glanced him up and down and curled his lip before wiping his hands off on his apron and sauntering over to him.

"Depends," he drawled maddeningly slowly, "Why do you need one? You ain't lookin' too scuffed up, cock robin."

Connor ground his teeth together.

"There is a woman," he nearly shouted, "hurt and unconscious for several hours. I do not know how to treat all of her injuries. Now is there a doctor or not?!"

Connor very nearly gave in to the urge to slap the disbelieving look off of the man's face.

"A woman, hurt?" he sneered, looking him up and down, "Like a richboy like you would care."

Luckily, a voice interfered before Connor could throw himself at the man.

"Excuse me," a man said, squeezing his way through the press of bodies to beside Connor at the bar, "but did I hear that someone needed a doctor? Doctor Lyle White," he said, sticking his hand out to shake, "I'm just passing through the city on my way to Boston-"

"Yes!" said Connor, seizing a hold of the bespectacled man's implied offer and ignoring his hand, "A friend of mine, her husband has beaten her and her daughter says that she has been unconscious for hours-"

"Hours?" the man interrupted. His eyebrows drew together. "Let me get my bag, my good man, and then lead the way."

Connor nearly cheered.

"My horse is the dark bay outside," he said, his excitement leaking into his tone, "with the white stockings. I will meet you there!"

The man was quick. Connor had barely leapt back into the saddle before the man was walking out of the door, a brown leather bag in his hand.

"Over here!" Connor shouted, waving his hand above his head, "I will give you a ride!"

Urging Akweks over to Dr. White, Connor didn't give the man any chance to change his mind. He nearly dragged the man onto the horse by the scruff of his neck, barely waiting for the man to situate himself before kicking her into a fast trot. The doctor nearly bounced out of the saddle, and
spent most of the ride clutching Connor's middle tightly as they ran back to the house.

"Can you give me a rough idea of the woman's injuries?" Dr. White spoke into Connor's ear as the moved along. A rather sharp bounce interrupted him briefly, but he continued on undeterred. "So that I may come to a rough idea of what sort of treatment that she requires?"

Connor kept his eyes glued on the road in front of them, weaving in and out of the mass of people that strode the streets.

"She has been unconscious for several hours at least, according to her daughter," he replied over his shoulder, "and when I arrived, her skirts--"

Connor hesitated, realizing belatedly that he was on a public street and that Ellen would probably not appreciate having her violation by her husband trumpeted to the skies. From the narrowing of Dr. White's eyes that he could see out of the corner of his own, though, it seemed that he had put the pieces together.

"It looked like a wild animal had attacked her," Connor finished, rather lamely. They were at the house now, the door left just a little ajar due to his hasty exit.

"I will pay for her treatment," he said to the doctor as they dismounted, Dr. White rather more clumsily than Connor. "And her medicine."

Dr. White held up a hand to stop him.

"Don't worry, young man - er, actually, what's your name?"

"Connor. Connor Kenway."

"Don't worry, Mr. Kenway," he said, climbing up the steps to the door, "we shall only discuss payment after she has been treated."

Connor blinked in surprise as he followed him up the stairs. Dr. Church would have never offered that. He had always demanded that he discuss payment before treating anyone.

As they entered the gloomy confines of the house, he felt his estimation of the doctor rise. Hopefully he would have the talent to back up such generous offers.

Maria was crouched down beside her mother, but rose to her feet as they entered.

"Mister Connor?" she said, her eyes red from crying, "Is this the doctor?"

"Yes, I am, my dear," Dr. White said before Connor could open his mouth. "Now," he said, kneeling down in front of the blanket-covered body of Ellen, "can you be a good girl and tell me exactly how long your mommy has been unconscious?"

Chapter End Notes

Hey, hope I wasn't too graphic with this. Please let me know what you think in the comments!
Dr. White was harshly scrubbing his hands in the soapy bowl of water that Connor had brought him, cleaning them of the dirt and blood that had coated Ellen's body when there was a sharp rap at the door. Looking up from where he was tucking Ellen in in her bed, Connor's eyes connected with the doctor's. Jerking his eyes towards the door, Dr. White wordlessly asked him if he knew who was there. Connor shrugged slightly, making the doctor's eyebrows crease.

Flashing an apologetic grimace at him and gently patting a sleeping Maria on the back, Connor padded silently over to the door. Quincent would not have knocked, so it was definitely not him. Most likely, it was one of Ellen's customers, checking in on the status of one of their orders.

Opening the door, Connor opened his mouth to shoo the person away and stopped.

Standing on the front step with not a hair out of place was his father.

"Son." Haytham Kenway greeted, "I rather thought that this would be where you were hiding."

Connor blinked rapidly. Hiding? Glancing at the sky, he felt a jolt as he saw just how low the sun had gotten. He should have been home hours ago!

Bowing his head in apology, he shuffled to one side to let his father enter. Glancing outside as he shut the door, he saw that a carriage was waiting, its chocolate-coloured horses pawing at the ground. The coachman and his assistant, named Jonah and Louis respectively, briefly jerked their heads in greeting at him. Connor waved back sheepishly.

"Well, Connor," his father said, dragging his attention back to the older man, "I must admit, you gave Mrs. Potts a bit of a worry when you did not arrive in time for tea."

Connor winced. Mrs Potts, his father's housekeeper, was a kind and gentle old woman who had doted on him the day he had first entered his father's house. Worrying her was the last thing that he wanted to do.

"I am sorry," he offered lamely. "I did not mean to worry anyone."

"And yet," his father said, taking off his hat and smoothing his silver hair back, "you did."

Connor gulped and looked down at his shoes, fighting the urge to fiddle with his cuffs.

"I am sorry," he repeated.

A finger underneath his chin lifted his gaze. His fathers pale grey eyes bored into him, searching his features.

"Sorry does not explain your actions," he said coolly.

"Ah, sir, I'm afraid that I can explain that."

His father turned his head to glance over his shoulder at Dr. White. The doctor, his shirtsleeves pushed up to his elbows, stood stiff-backed in the small hallway of the house, his chin jutting out and a dangerous gleam in his eye.
"Oh?"
"This young man was helping me treat a grievously injured patient. Without his help, the fine lady would have most likely lain insensate for days from her injuries."

For a second, Connor saw confusion on his father's face. It was swiftly replaced with understanding, though. He too had seen the bruises and heard Ellen's complaints over the years that they had been going to her, and judging by the thinning of his lips, he was just as infuriated as Connor was. All Dr. White saw though, Connor was sure, was his father's eyes narrowing as he turned to fully face him. Judging by how his face was paling, Dr. White saw the threat in his father's posture, but Connor had to respect that he did not back down.

"What injuries?" his father growled.

Dr. White swallowed visibly, but his voice was strong when he answered.

"To start with, signs of strangulation. Broken ribs. A crushed hand and three broken fingers. Biting injuries on her thighs and breasts, and a broken nose. There is more, but those are the worst of the injuries that I managed to catalogue with my assistant's help."

Connor watched as his father clasped his hands behind him, his hands twitching in aborted motions to unsheathe his hidden blades and radiating deadly anger. Looking back to Dr. White, he tried to communicate through facial expressions that his father's anger was not aimed at him, but rather at the man who had attacked their seamstress.

"I see. And you have the credentials to treat her?"

Connor started and looked at his father. That was unfair! His father ignored him though, focusing in on the doctor's reactions.

Dr. White did not disappoint. Pressing his own lips together, his fear seemed to fall to the wayside and he took a step forward, clenching his hands into fists.

"My credentials, sir? You barge into this house, berate my assistant and then demand to see my credentials?"

His father gave a short, mirthless laugh.

"Your assistant, you say? Please. Connor is no sawbones' apprentice, you -"

Connor darted in between the two of them, holding his hands out to keep them from getting any closer.

"Father, please!" he pleaded, "Doctor White is a fine doctor who agreed to come with me to treat Ellen with no thought for his own profit! He meant no harm in implying that I was his apprentice."

"Father?"

Looking back towards the doctor, Connor saw that the man looked like someone had slapped him. "Yes, father."

His father took a threatening step forward, ignoring Connor's hand against his chest.

"Do you have a problem, perhaps, with that?" he continued icily.

Dr. White scowled.
"Hardly," he said, "I'm just not used to most men of your apparent status coming to collect their children personally."

"I pride myself in not being most men."

Connor wanted to groan. Turning, he grasped his father's lapels to get his attention.

"Father," he said, "Rake'ni, I came to Ellen's to have my clothes let out and came upon her unconscious in the kitchen. When I ran to the nearest tavern, Dr. White was the only one to come forward and offer to treat her. He has agreed to stay for the night in case Quincent comes back. He is not a bad man, so please do not fight with him."

After what seemed like an age, his father's stormy grey eyes looked down at Connor and softened slightly.

"I see," he said. Placing his hat back on his head, he turned back to the door. "In that case, Dr. White, please send your bill to Fraunces Tavern, they will forward it to me."

Yanking open the door, he paused and turned to the side.

"Now come along Connor," he said, "before our dinner gets cold."

Sighing and shooting an apologetic look over his shoulder, Connor followed obediently. The coachman's apprentice Louis slid down from his seat beside the coachman to grab abead of Akweks' reigns. He bowed as Connor passed, murmuring assurances that she would be taken home behind them.

"Connor."

His father was already seated within the carriage, his legs crossed and Jonah holding the door open for him. He arched his eyebrows at Connor as he scrambled in, seating himself in the seat beside him as Jonah shut the door behind him. Jonah locked the door and jumped back into his seat, and with a quick shout, they began the long journey back to their house on the outskirts of New York.

For several minutes, they sat in silence. Around them, the carriage creaked and groaned, and despite himself, Connor's mind drifted back to Ellen and Maria.

What kind of man could do such a thing?

To strike his wife. To terrorize his own child. To violate Ellen as she lay unconscious in front of him and then take her money for more drinking! It was anathema to Connor, that the man could do such things and not be ostracized by everyone around him! It nauseated him, sometimes, to realize that to some colonists, such actions would be perfectly fine, even deserved by Ellen for her complaining of his actions. Colonist society was the most bizarre, broken and sickening thing that he had ever known, sometimes - "

A hand on his arm pulled him out of his dark thoughts, and looking at his father's concerned face, he blurted out the main thought at the top of his mind.

"Please let me kill him."

Haytham raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not quite sure what that has to do with the party next week, but do continue," he said, "who precisely is it that you wish to kill?"
Connor could feel his cheeks burning at the implied rebuke for not listening, but he forged onward.

"Ellen's husband," he said, "he needs to die."

For a moment, his father simply looked at him, his face neutral. Then he closed his eyes and sighed, sitting back in his seat and crossing his legs.

"Alright then," he said, "explain your reasoning."

Connor swallowed and tried to put his thoughts in order.

"Well, to start with, he has greatly harmed Ellen."

"He does that on a regular basis."

"Not to this extent. He has been getting more violent as the years have gone by, his assault of her last night is a pattern of escalation."

His eyes still closed, his father drummed his fingers on his knee. Heartened by the silence, Connor continued.

"On top of beating Ellen, he regularly steals her hard earned money and spends it on alcohol, as well as scaring off customers in the first place. He rarely works, and routinely insults his wife, and terrifies his child, and - "

"Mmmm, and he should die for this?" his father interrupted.

Connor stared at his father in disbelief. How could a man, no, a leech such as Quincent deserve to live?! He did not just harm himself, he poisoned his family as well with his violence and drunkeness!

His father turned his head and cracked open an eye.

"Do not mistake me; I agree with you," he said, "But we cannot simply kill just because we do not like someone for some petty reason. That would make us no better than mad dogs. You must be able to defend your choice of targets, with a clear set of standards as to why they must die, else you will fall onto the bloody path of the Assassins."

Connor clenched his jaw. Sometimes, he really hated how his father seemed to turn every conversation into a lecture. But, taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that it came from a good place.

The first day that they had started to truly train, his father had spoken to him. Warning him that it was easy to slip into the mindset of simply killing anyone that got in one's way when one knew just how easy it was to kill, and that he would have to guard himself closely and stay ever vigilant of his behaviour if he wished to be a Templar Knight.

So, after a few deep breaths, Connor pressed his hands together and banished the anger that had been smouldering underneath his skin all day.

"Quincent Newman should die because he causes chaos wherever he goes."

Glancing over, he saw his father cock his head.

"His assaults of his wife disturbs his child. She was running in the streets when I met her, screaming for someone to help her mother. It disturbs Ellen's business; he has chased away several
customers that I know of with his insinuations. He brawls in the streets, disturbing his neighbours, and carries on drinking and shouting in the small hours of the morning." Ellen had been especially scathing the days that she had complained about that. He could remember how viciously she had stabbed the dressform with her pins, complaining how the regulars had eventually been called to deal with him, and how she had had to dip into her savings to bail him out of his cell.

"Most of all, though, his actions harm not just his family but his whole neighbourhood. He is a poison that is killing the people around him." Connor hesitated for a moment.

"I don't think that she'll survive the next beating," he admitted quietly.

For several heartbeats, there was silence between them. Then -

"Your reasoning is sound," his father said, "but you will need a plan if you wish to kill Mister Newman."

Glancing over, Connor saw his father's lips crook upwards slightly in a proud smile, and, relieved, he smiled back. Then his father's words caught up to him.

"A plan?" he parroted.

"A plan," his father confirmed, nodding his head.

"Before you go and kill Mister Newman, I will require that you outline a satisfactory plan for not only killing the man, but disposing of his body and escaping without suspicion falling on you." Gently grasping Connor's chin between his thumb and forefinger, he looked deeply into his eyes. Despite the gentleness of his hands, though, Connor could see the steel in his eyes.

"If you cannot do so, I will give the job to another. However," he said, "if you do succeed, then I will consider it...a start to your service to the Templar Order. A practice run, if you will."

He settled back in his seat, still with a small smile on his face as Connor sat there, stunned.

Starting his service to the Order! He had not in his wildest dreams dared think that his father would allow him to take such a role in his work before his eighteenth birthday! He had assumed that his days would be spent honing his skills to a fine sharp edge and running messages to his men!

"I-I am honoured, Rake'n!" he said, unable to keep that grin off of his face. "I will do you proud!"

His father flashed him another small, satisfied smile. Reaching out, he patted Connor's knee again.

"I have no doubt that you will," he said, and the warm confidence in his tone had Connor smiling all of the way back to the Manor.

Connor was fairly certain that his father had not expected him to come up with a murder plan so quickly. Personally, he was rather proud of himself for his speed; after all, Quincent only went on his drinking benders for as long as his money lasted. Then he would return home to Ellen, looking for more money for his next bender. That made time of the essence.

As it was, though, his father had been satisfied with the plan that he had outlined yesterday and given permission for Connor to go ahead. That was why he was perched on a roof, half-hidden beside a chimney and watching as Quincent was literally thrown out of The Crown.

Snarling and spitting, the battered and bloody man staggered to his feet, wiping his face clean of
the street's muck. Clearing his throat, he spat at the door of the tavern and turned to stagger off.

Smirking, Connor stood up from behind the chimney. Apparently, for all that Quincent accused Ellen of dishonoring their vows, he himself did not see his own relations with his supposed 'friend's' wife as the same. A quiet word in their favourite drinking holes, and the other man had been quick to start swinging.

For a moment, he simply watched Quincent go. Then he focused his senses. Immediately, the world darkened and warped. Buildings and objects were outlined in white like they were made of dissipating smoke and smelling pleasantly neutral. Quincent, meanwhile, turned the deep rich gold of freshly baked bread and began to give off a faint shimmering sound, like crystal glasses knocking together.

There was no trace of red on the streets making his mouth taste of hot metal and blood. That, however, did not mean that there were no enemies nearby, as his father had warned him.

With a breath and a twinge of resignation in his stomach, Connor let his eyelids half-cover his eyes as he pushed/felt outwards around him. The nauseating overlay, not quite seen or felt, of the streets around him snapped into place. Drops of red, tasted more than seen, slowly inched their way around the edge of his awareness.

A sharp pain lanced through his head, and with a grimace, Connor let his vision go back to normal. He had been able to do this strange Eagle-Eye's View of his surroundings since he was four and had nearly died after being poisoned by the Assassins, and still he could not keep it up for any real length of time. For all that his father lectured him about how such an extension of their family's special eyes was invaluable, he sometimes wished that he had never been drugged by those Assassins.

With his safety assured, Connor jumped over to the next roof. Jumping from roof to roof, he trailed Quincent as he staggered down the docks, searching for another tavern that had not already banned him from the premises. His skin prickled in the chill of the early autumn night air, feeling simultaneously too hot and too cold. He was hyper-aware of the few Regulars that were still up at this time, even if they were half-asleep at their posts. It would only take one Regular sentry to spot him and raise the alarm, ruining nearly a week of work and disappointing his father.

Finally, Quincent turned into a small allyway, snorting and spitting and growling about whores loud enough for Connor to hear him. Crouching at the edge of the roof, the shingles gritty underneath his hands, Connor reached up and unknotted his rough red cravat from around his throat. Wrapping one end around each hand, he waited until Quincent was right underneath him and jumped.

He hit the older drunk man feet-first, knocking the breath out of him and keeping him from calling out. As he lay on the ground, gasping for air, Connor slammed his knee in between his shoulderblades, wound his cravat around his greasy neck and pulled.

Quincent's back arched as his hands flew up to try and pry the ligature away from his neck, clawing frantically. Connor just pulled tighter. As Quincent's body began to buck underneath him, trying in vain to shake him off, Connor steadied himself with his knees and pushed/felt again. There were still no soldiers nearby, but Connor knew that that would probably change soon. Most of the taverns would be closing very soon, and there would have to be soldiers out to deal with any belligerent drunks stumbling their way home.

The minutes that it took for Quincent to die were the longest of his life. The man jerked and shuddered for ages, clawing at the dirt, his neck, the tops of Connor's hands - he seemed as
stubborn and irritating dying as he was in living. Finally though, his body stilled, and the scent of his bowels voiding in death filled Connor's nose.

After another minute of keeping the cravat wound around Quincent's neck, Connor loosened the piece of fabric and retied it around his own neck. His heart was pounding. The sound almost drowned out the sound of rats rustling through the alleyway.

Breathing in deeply through his mouth, Connor stood and straightened his clothes. Pulling out a small hip-flask that his father had let him borrow, he spashed a little alcohol down his front. The sharp smell of alcohol stung his nose and mad his eyes water. Nodding to himself, he then bent down to pick the body up. Slinging Quincent's arm over his shoulders, he began to drag the body back to the docks, trying to walk as drunkenly as possible.

Every fiber in his body wanted to run. He could have sworn that he felt eyes on him, knowing what he had done. His Eagle-Eye View did not show any enemies nearby, though, and so he gritted his teeth and continued to mimic the staggering walk of a drunkard returning home after a long night of drinking.

The docks came up fast, thankfully. Taking one last look around with his Eagle-Eye and seeing nothing, he heaved Quincent's body into the water with a splash. Quickly stretching, Connor glanced around to see if there were any non-enemy witnesses. A scan with his normal special vision showed only a small vagrant, curled up in an alleyway and probably sleeping.

Just in case the vagrant wasn't sleeping, Connor slipped back into the shambling drunkard's shuffle that he had practiced, mumbling slurried nonsense underneath his breath. He headed away from the docks and more into the city, allowing the narrow, winding streets to swallow him up. Finally, he judged that he was far enough from the scene of the crime to stop pretending to be drunk. Pausing to catch his breath, he looked around to figure out where he could climb onto a roof.

The sound of hooves clopping stopped him. Behind him, at the other end of the alleyway, a horse-drawn carriage pulled up, and as he watched, the carriage door opened.

"Well," said his father, "do you need an invitation?"

Connor didn't need to be told twice. Scrambling, he clambered in and settled into the seat beside his father. Leaning back, the carriage began to move as soon as his father closed the door, taking them back home.

Exhaustion swept through Connor. All of a sudden, he was aware of his body aching, his hands raw from strangling Quincent and back aching from carrying his body back to the docks. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and sleep until lunch the next day.

"Everything went according to plan, I presume?"

His father's silky tones cut through the haze that was surrounding Connor's mind. With some effort, he managed to open his eyes to look at his father.

"Yes father," he murmured.

"His friend," and oh his father sneered at that term, "believed you that he was sleeping with his wife?"

"Yes father. All of the bruises should be blamed on him."

"And the strangling?"
"No witnesses."

"And disposal?"

"They should just think that he tripped and fell and was too drunk to get out or call for help."

Sighing, Connor closed his eyes again slumped a little more in his seat. By the Great Mother, he was so tired.

A warm arm wrapped itself around his shoulders. Connor cracked open his eyelids again, wondering what other questions his father would ask him.

His father said nothing. In the dim lighting of the carriage, it was hard to see his expression. The brush of his lips against his forehead managed to communicate his feelings equally as well, though.

"Sleep well, son," his father murmured into his hair, "I am very proud of you."

Connor smiled sleepily and cuddled closer to his father's side. Ellen was safe now, and his father was proud.

All in all, it was a good end to the day.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, let me know what you think about a twice-weekly update schedule in the comments!
Connor loved and respected animals. As a child, his mother had been happy to name any of the animals that he, with his child's curiosity, had pointed out for her, even catching them if they were small enough so that he could pet them. After his father had taken him in, his love of animals had only grown. His father, despite the cool and controlled face that he showed the world, loved animals as well, always having a few scraps and a good scratch behind an itchy ear available for the strays that roamed New York's streets.

With parents like that, it was no surprise that he had grown up to truly cherish and respect animals, even when he was hunting them.

Groaning, he pulled his pillow out from underneath his head and clamped it around his ears.

But if that woodpecker did not stop hammering at the tree outside of his window, he was going to throw a shoe at it.

Of course, he didn't actually do anything like that. Instead, he decided to concede defeat gracefully and, sighing, sat up and tossed his pillow to one side. Running a hand through his messy brown hair, he pulled back his covers, embroidered by his grandmother, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Standing up, he squinted as sunlight streamed through the windows. The two large windows that lined his east-facing room, giving an excellent view of the fields outside and the woodpecker's tree, were unmoved by his silent plea to stop letting the morning light in. On the wall opposite of the bed was his wardrobe and washstand, both made of mahogany, and both being carved with traditional Kanien'kâ'ha patterns. They had been gifts from his Uncle Johnson when he was still young and homesick for his people at times.

Now that he was awake, he could hear the servants stirring. The maids were probably getting breakfast ready, with Mrs Potts overseeing the younger maids with an steely eye and wooden spoon. Jonah would be rousing Louis so that they could get the horses ready for any business that his father had that day.

His father was probably up as well. Connor sighed and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. So much for a lie-in. Shuffling over to the washstand and scratching his jaw, Connor poured water into the bowl and splashed it on his face, chasing away the last vestiges of sleep. Drying his face with the towel beside the bowl, he turned and began to walk towards the wardrobe. Thankfully, while Ellen was recovering, his father had gotten him to another tailor, so at least his clothing now fit.

Still drying his face off, the yelp as his foot struck something soft and warm took him off guard. Tearing the towel away from his face, Connor was immediately met with the large, watering eyes and whimpering of Okwaho.

"I am sorry, Okwaho," he said, pulling the former bull-baiting dog into a hug, "I did not mean to do that to you!"

For a few moments, the dog continued to whine as Connor rubbed his back. Connor felt terrible. Okwaho had been a gift from his father, found in a bull-baiting pit as a small puppy with his hind leg torn off and the stub only half-healed. While his father had been worried about how Connor would react to getting a half-crippled dog, he had fallen in love the first time he had licked his
cheek. After that first lick, they had become inseparable, going everywhere together when he was living with his father. His Uncle Charles had helped him train him, getting him to the point that he would eat out of Connor's hand with a wagging tail.

Speaking of which, his ropy tail was wagging now, announcing the end of his whining. As Connor loosened his arms, Okwaho wriggled out and gave his chin a long, loving lick, startling a laugh out of his master. Standing up, Connor continued towards his wardrobe as Okwaho circled his legs, his tail wagging hard enough to move his entire hindquarters.

Dressing was a quick affair, and soon Connor was heading out of his door with Okwaho at his heels. The delicious smells of bacon and fresh biscuits floated through the air as he came down the stairs, making Okwaho lick his chops in anticipation of the little treats that would be snuck to him under the table.

Connor's father was already sitting at the head of the dining room's table when he walked in, sipping at a cup of tea. Sitting beside his empty plate was a wooden chest, plain except for a small Templar Cross carved into the lid.

"Connor," he greeted, his face blank.

"Rake'ni," Connor replied. Licking his lips, he sat down in his chair, careful not to comment on his father's odd stoicism. Leaning forward, he snagged a biscuit and a piece of bacon. Dropping the biscuit on his plate, he slipped the strip of bacon to Okwaho, ignoring his father's raised eyebrow. He figured that the dog deserved a treat after getting kicked, regardless of whether or not it was an accident.

Sighing, his father let the matter lie. Putting his cup down, he folded his hands over each other and looked at Connor intently as he began to break apart his biscuit.

"It appears, Connor, that our friend Mr. Newman was found facedown in the New York harbour this morning," he said, his voice inflectionless.

Connor paused in buttering the bottom half of the biscuit. Holding the warm bread in his hand, he looked back at the older man. His father eyes were blank, and his posture emotionless. Unconsciously, Connor found himself mimicking him.

"It appears that they think he fell in and was too drunk to climb out."

Connor felt a smile break out across his face. Letting out a relieved huff, he relaxed slightly in his seat and smiled.

"That is a pity," he commented, turning back to his biscuit. Leaning across the table, he swiped another pat of butter onto his knife. "I hope that Ellen and Maria will not be too upset."

His father smirked at him.

"I'm sure that they will be fine," he said lightly, nudging the butter dish closer to him. The tension in the room dissipated, and they both began to dig in in earnest to their breakfast.

Connor was halfway through his plate when his father sat back and wiped his lips with a napkin, his plate scraped clean. Glancing over, Connor saw that he had folded his hands again.

"I know that I have told you about the party that we will be attending this week," he said, and Connor's gut clenched. A party? Frantically flipping through his memories, he thought that maybe he remembered his father mentioning something, but most of his recent memories were taken up
with planning out Quincent's murder. His father noticed his nervousness and smiled sardonically.

"I thought so," he said, sounding oddly satisfied. Picking up his teacup, he continued to speak. "There is a party happening tonight. A British officer apparently wants to drum up some support for a few personal business ventures, and he may have some objects of interest to the Order. We are not well acquainted though; not enough for me to easily search his belongings or question him without suspicion as to where I got my information. Luckily, though, the party is serving another goal; it's also his daughter's birthday."

He looked over at Connor.

"Since you did such a good job with your previous assignment," he said, "I rather think that a bit of dancing is not much to ask."

Connor swallowed his mouthful that suddenly tasted of sand and put down his utensils. Dancing. In public. With a bunch of people that he did not know. His gut roiled and he knew that he had gone pale.

His father touched his hand gently.

"Templar Knights do occasionally have to do things that make them uncomfortable," he said gently. "And you won't be alone. Major Pitcairn will be there with Katherine, as will Commander Davenport and Eleanor."

Despite his father's comforting words, Connor found himself chewing the inside of his cheek. Two friendly faces out of dozens were not much.

Licking his lips, he gripped the edge of the table.

"Will I need to talk to the daughter?" he asked.

"Oh, lord no," his father replied, patting his hand comfortably, "you're far too young to be of any interest to her. No, I just need you to get into the party in the first place."

The knot in Connor's stomach loosened a little. If that was the case, then maybe he would be able to get away with just one or two dances. Eleanor hated dancing just as much as he did; perhaps they could convince Katherine to come play cards with them in a corner after they had done their duty.

His father sighed beside him and stood up.

"In any case, that was not the only thing that I wanted to talk to you about," he said. Laying a hand on the box that had sat beside him throughout breakfast, he picked it up and handed it to Connor. Taking it and settling it in his lap, Connor was surprised by how light it was.

"I had these commissioned this summer while you were visiting your village," his father said as he traced his fingers over the carved cross on the lid, "intending to give them to you a later date. However, with you taking your first steps towards joining the Order, I thought that you might enjoy getting them a little early."

Connor looked up at his father, his heart suddenly thundering in his ears. Was this - ?

Flipping the lid of the box open, he couldn't stop the grin spreading across his face. There, nestled in velvet, were a pair of hidden blades. Reverently taking them out, he simply held them, admiring the fine, butter-soft leather that they were made of and the shining Templar Crosses tied on to
them. They looked just like his father's!

Looking up, he saw his father's usual ghost of a smile playing around his lips as he looked down at him.

"They are a responsibility," he said, his fond tones belying his stern words, "not toys. And I will be teaching you how to properly use them. After you are done your morning lessons - grk!"

Connor launched himself at his father, wrapping the arm that was not carrying the box of hidden blades tightly around his middle. His face buried in his chest, Connor could feel his father stiffen, then relax. Gently, he wrapped his strong arms around Connor's shoulders and returned the hug.

"Thank you," Connor said, "I will not disappoint you."

His father rubbed a thumb along his shoulder.

"I know you won't."

The party was like every other colonist party that Connor's father had dragged him to; hot, stuffy and far too full of self-important and smelly people chattering at each other. Running a finger underneath his cravat, Connor tried to subtly loosen it and let a breath of cooler air underneath the cloth. To his disappointment, all he got was another wave of warm air. To think, that they were not even in the meeting house's main room and it was this hot!

"Ooooh, use up all of your good cards?" said Eleanor teasingly. Looking across the small table, Connor raised an eyebrow at his old friend and placed his last card on the pile in the middle, smirking at her annoyed pout.

"Hardly," he said dryly, "it is just the heat. Perhaps instead of reading into my every gesture, you could pay attention to your own hand."

Eleanor wrinkled her nose at him as Katherine Pitcairn giggled behind her own hand.

"Don't you sass me," she warned him, wagging a finger at him, "or I'll bloody your nose again, just you wait and see."

Connor just smirked at her. Eleanor and him had been friends for years, with her father dragging her with him every time he visited Connor's father for Order business. They hadn't started out as friends, though. It had taken a fight in which she had given him a bloody nose and he had blackened her eyes before they made peace, a fact which she loved to remind him.

"How about you stop stalling and play your card?" he joked lightly with her.

Scowling, she slapped down a card, clearly aware that his card beat it. Katherine giggled again at the look on her face.

"It looks like you lose again, Ellie," she teased, gathering up the other girl's cards and handing them to Connor.

Eleanor stuck her tongue out at the hated nickname and tossed the rest of her cards on the table.

"Whatever," she declared, "I blame your shuffling."
"Of course you do," Connor murmured, collecting Katherine's cards as well. Neatly packing them into a deck, he handed them to Eleanor. "In that case," he said, "you can go ahead and shuffle the next hand yourself. I am going to go and cool off."

Eleanor took them and slumped back in her chair in a way that would have her father shouting at her if he could see it, jerking her chin at him in acknowledgement.

"Does that mean you're forfeiting this hand?" she asked, her eyes gleaming.

"I suppose so," he said pausing in the doorway. "Have fun."

Eleanor's bark of a laughter at his sarcasm mingled with Katherine's laugh, following him out of the room and into the night air.

After the heat of the meeting house, the frosty nip of early autumn was a relief. Stretching his arms above his head, Connor enjoyed the burn in his muscles. It had been far too long, sitting in that chair and playing cards with his friends. They had disappeared after the first dance with the host's daughter and that was several hours ago.

Placing his hands on his hips and letting out a breath, Connor admired the walled-in courtyard. It was beautifully maintained, with neatly trimmed bushes arranged in such a way as to allow privacy for anyone seeking to be alone. The tall wall muffled the sounds of anyone walking by the building as well, making it perfect for private conversations. With the nip of autumn in the air, though, most people were holding their conversations inside.

Overall though, Connor found himself preferring the wilder frontier to the strict order of the plants in front of him. Scratching his jaw, he wondered if he could convince his father to allow him to go out into the frontier again once spring had arrived. He was an adult by the standards of his people, true, but Connor knew that by colonist standards he was still barely more than a child. Even if he did not go all the way back to his village, a few days out of the city and surrounded by the wilds would help him settle his soul, he knew.

Connor turned back towards the door, having cooled off enough, and paused as something rustled in the bushes behind him.

Tensing, he reached for the throwing knife hidden in his waistcoat that his father had allowed him to bring. He had forbidden him bringing his hidden blades, saying that Connor was not experienced enough to keep from accidently unsheathing them in the middle of the dance floor, but he had approved a few throwing knives fitted into the lining of Connor's waistcoat.

Behind him, the rustling got louder. Readyng his knife, Connor very nearly threw it towards the source of the rustling when -

"Pissed!"

Connor paused mid-throw.

"Pissed!"

Wrinkling his brow, he lowered his knife and squinted towards the bushes.

"Are you - are you trying to say 'psst'?" he asked.

An embarassed silence emanated from the bushes for several moments. Then the bush grumbled quietly. Rustling again, Connor watched as a pair of thin to the point of skeletal ankles emerged
from the bush, followed by equally skinny set of legs, and then a body. A small, bony hand reached up and nervously pushed back a thick shag of straw-yellow hair out of brown eyes.

It was little boy, clad in a roughly cut-down man's shirt and ragged breeches and looking utterly out of place in the orderly and neat garden that they were standing in.

Connor blinked and stared at the boy, who fidgeted and looked like he was fighting the urge to look down at his feet.

"Who...are you?" he asked, taking a small step towards the boy.

The boy flinched and took a larger step back, tugging on his ragged shirt.

"M'name's Fillian," he mumbled, looking at him with large brown eyes, "Fillian McCarthy. And and you're gonna help me or I'm gonna tell everyone that a mad Injun's runnin' around killin' people!"

Connor later figured that Fillian had been trying to stay out of his reach, with how he had stepped back as he stepped forward. However, standing in the garden at the time, all Connor knew was that he had to take an extra step to grab the little boy by the front of his shirt and drag him close.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, his voice dropping to a deep growl.

The boy's eyes were wide enough to see the whites all around the irises. Clawing at Connor's hands, he struggled to escape his iron grip.

"I saw you!" he squeaked, "You killed that guy an' then threw him in the harbour!"

What?

Keeping his grip on the boy's shirtfront, Connor thought furiously. How could he have missed being watched? He had checked around with his special vision at nearly every step, and even before he had truly gotten started he had used his Eagle's View of the buildings around him to check for enemies!

He glared at the boy and tried to calm himself as his father had taught him.

"You are bluffing," he growled, "no printer would lower himself to print the words of some random beggar off of the streets. And even if you did, my father could easily bribe them to print a retraction."

"Aye, but wouldn't it be a pain, having to go through all that effort?" the boy asked. He didn't sound very sure of himself.

"And what, precisely, is keeping Connor here from simply snapping your wretched little neck?"

Connor whipped his head around. Eleanor was standing in the doorway, grinning nastily at the two of them.

"Eleanor," he said, standing up and dragging Fillian with him, "I thought you were still playing cards."

Eleanor shrugged.

"Katherine decided she wanted to dance some more, and I hate Solitaire, so I was going to ask if you were ready to come back in," she said simply, moving closer to him. "But this looks far more
interesting than cards."

She looked down at the little blond beggar.

"So, what exactly's been making you think that threatening a man you've seen kill someone in cold blood is a good idea, hmm?" she purred, leaning down and tickling the blond boy under the chin. "Don't you know how easy it would be to kill you?"

To Connor, it seemed that it was truly hitting Fillian now just what a bad idea this had been. His eyes were wide and shiny with tears, and Connor could feel him trembling.

Despite the fact that he had been threatening to expose him to the press, Connor felt himself softening slightly.

Sighing, he lowered the boy but kept a good grip on him.

"Listen," he said calmly, "you do not seem to have thought this through. What were you expecting to get from me?"

The boy audibly gulped, but to his credit, his voice did not waver.

"I need someone like you. That can fight and sneak and stuff."

"For what?" asked Eleanor, leaning against Connor like he was a post.

"To save my sister."

Connor's eyebrows shot up to his hairline; a sister? Looking at Eleanor, he saw that her eyebrows were also raised, but in her case it was from disbelief.

"A sister, eh?" she said, scratching her chin. "And what is it that's got her in such trouble?"

"I, the man that she was - staying with," the boy blushed, and even Connor, as sheltered as he knew he was, got the hint of what 'staying with' entailed, "he was kicking her out with nothing, so she stole something that he had that was really valuable and was going to demand money from him but he caught her and he's keepin' her somewhere and I can't go to the soldiers 'cuz he's in charge of a lotta them -"

Connor covered the boy's mouth.

"Your sister," he said, "she provided - services, for this man?"

The boy was scarlet as he nodded.

"But she only did it so that we could eat!" he said fiercely, "And so we could have a place to stay! She does everything for me, and -"

"Eeesh, we get it," Eleanor complained, cleaning her ear with her pinky. Connor turned to scowl at her. She shrugged his glare off.

"So your sister's a whore who tried to squeeze a little more money from her john after he got bored of her. Again," she said, crossing her arms, "why should Connor here care?"

"Eleanor!" Connor snapped. That was uncalled for! From the way that the boy was talking, he and his sister were poor and desperate for money. Eleanor glared back at him, and he turned away, shaking his head. While his father was not the most personally generous person around, his
mother's people did not look down upon those who did what they had to do to survive in a
desperate situation the way the colonists did. Sometimes, for all that Connor had lived amongst the
colonists, he would never understand the way they looked down upon women.

"Do you know where your sister is being held?" he asked softly.

As the boy nodded, Eleanor scoffed.

"Connor Kenway," she snapped, "don't tell me you are actually going to fall for this sob story!"

Connor squared his shoulders and ignored her.

Eleanor groaned exaggeratedly and thumped him on the shoulder with a fist.

"You are far too soft-hearted for your own good," she warned him. "It's only going to hurt you in
the long run, you know."

"Perhaps," said Connor, a bit terser than he intended, "but today is not that day."

Turning back to Fillian, he let the front of the boy's shirt go and placed his hands on his hips.

"If you are simply trying to lure me into an ambush or in any way cause harm to my father, you
will regret it," he warned. "But if not, meet me by the south side of my father's property in the city
tomorrow night; we will discuss this further then."
Connor did his best to ignore Eleanor flicking peanut shells at him as he waited on a bench for Fillian at the Bowling Green. Slouching back against the brick wall a little more so that his hat better covered his face, he brushed the peanut shells off of his shoulder and checked his hidden blades. He may not have been very experienced, but he had been raised on his father's stories of how often his own set of blades had saved his life. Better safe than sorry, he figured.

"He's certainly taking his sweet time, is he not?" Eleanor said idly in her raspy 'boy voice', as if they were just waiting outside of a store rather than about to meet an attempted blackmailer to discuss rescuing his sister from bondage. She flicked another peanut shell at him, munching on the sweet nut as she lounged on the bench.

"I'm sure that he has a good reason," Connor said, refusing to look at her.

"Really," Eleanor snorted, "like what? Needed to do a little extra begging for his supper tonight?"

Connor sighed and decided to not dignify that with an answer. He had to wonder why she was even here; she had made her feelings about Connor's choices very clear during the party.

And yet, she remained. Wearing a boy's set of clothes with her breasts bound tight to her chest and her hair pinned up underneath a hat, she looked the part of a wealthy young man waiting for the night air to clear his head after a night of drinking, despite the moon still rising. Connor, on the other hand, had specifically worn several of his more beaten up pieces of clothing to the meeting, keeping in mind Hickey's lessons when he was younger about appearances. Namely, that people rarely look past them. If they were going to be spying tonight, then he did not want to stand out in the night the way Eleanor would.

Eleanor tugged on his sleeve to get his attention.

"So," she said, smacking her lips, "what exactly are you expecting to get out of this, anyways? Sense of satisfaction for helping your fellow man?"

Connor growled at the sneer in her voice.

"Why are you here if all you are going to do is mock me?" he snapped, keeping his voice low.

Sighing, Eleanor sat up, her now-empty peanut bag dangling from her fingers.

"Because, stupid," she said, "I don't want you getting into some sort of trouble that you can't get out of by yourself. I actually do give a shit about you, after all."

"You have an odd way of showing it," Connor noted testily, "and may I remind you who defeated whom in our last practice bout?"

"And may I remind you who defeated whom in the practice bout before that?" Eleanor replied, standing up and tossing the peanut bag to the ground. Placing her hands on her hips, she had a strange look on her face. "Look, Connor, you agreed to this without even knowing anything about the brat; for all you know, this could be some Assassin plot to kidnap you as leverage against your father."

"The last time I checked, the Assassins did not use children as messengers."
"Yeah, well, your dad thought that they didn't kill children either, and they certainly proved him wrong, didn't they?"

Connor jerked his head back, feeling as if he had been slapped. He hated how everyone always brought up his kidnapping when they were trying to prove a point over him, as if it was his fault that the Assassins were able to kidnap him when he was four years old and nearly kill him. Biting the inside of his cheek, he looked away and breathed through his nose.

Eleanor sighed as he stared at the ground and struggled to reign in his temper.

"Look," she said, stepping forward and placing a hand on his shoulder, "I'm only being a bitch because I care and I don't want you to get hurt. That's why I'm here; for back-up."

Connor pressed his lips together and shook his head.

"I just wish you could be my back-up without mocking me," he said, looking up at her.

She smirked at him and punched his shoulder.

"But then I wouldn't be me," she said in a sing-song.

Connor rolled his eyes.

Her face became serious again.

"But really," she said, "why are you doing this? I know that your 'friend's' death was ruled an accident, and that there's nothing but his word connecting you to it, so it can't be the possibility of blackmail."

Connor shifted where he was standing and didn't answer. He couldn't. Not when he wasn't entirely sure himself.

Eleanor sighed.

"Seriously?" she asked wearily, "Is it out of some sort of sympathy?" She took a step closer to him. "She's a whore who got in a little too deep, and has a worried sibling. There are hundreds of stories like that in this city alone - she is not worth the deep shit we'll be in if your or my dad finds out about this."

Connor glanced at her.

"Just because she has to do things that you do not approve of does not mean that she deserves what is happening to her," he said coolly.

"I didn't say anything about approving or disapproving of her life choices!"

"You implied it." Connor straightened where he was standing. "You should not shame those who find that they must do unsavoury things to ensure their own survival."

"Why would I shame someone for doing stuff like that! For fucks sake, we're both being trained to kill people, that's as unsavoury as things get!"

"I know how colonists think, and I know that they think less of someone selling their body for money than someone who kills another person for money!"

"Fuck!" Eleanor growled and swung away from him. "You drive me crazy sometimes with this shit!"
Connor growled, but held himself back from snapping the very same words back at her. Friends or no, the things she said sometimes were pointlessly cruel, and her excuses wore thin after the sixth time he had heard them.

Breathing through his nose, he squeezed his eyes shut and scratched his jaw, reigning his temper back until he felt that he could speak without shouting.

"If that's the way you feel," he said, concentrating on keeping his voice level, "then you can leave. I am not the person keeping you here."

Eleanor stiffened and wheeled back towards him.

"Fine, whatever," she snapped, "do your stupid shit with this stupid beggar and his stupid slut of a sister; but I'm not going to bail you out again!"

"Fine."

"Fine!"

"Fine."

"Fine!"

Something clattered nearby.

Immediately, the two of them tensed and turned, placing their backs to each other and putting a hand on the swords strapped to their sides.

Connor looked around, trying to figure out where the sound had come from. The Bowling Green was large and empty, making it easy to see where people were; it was the reason why he had named it as their meeting place with Fillian. However, at the same time, it had a lot of entrances and exits. Beside him, he knew that Eleanor was also scanning the Green for who had made the noise, and for a horrible moment, he considered the likelihood of the Assassins having used Fillian as a lure as she had suggested.

Then, out of the alleyway across from them, the skinny blond figure of Fillian emerged. Still dressed in the tattered men's shirt and rolled up breeches from last night, he darted across the Green towards them, his thin legs pumping and arms flailing wildly in the uncoordinated way of young children.

Reaching them, he stopped and rested his hands on his knees, panting.

"You came!" he exclaimed, "You really came!"

"Of course I did," Connor said, stepping forward, "I gave my word."

"I know, but -" the boy's chest was heaving, "I mean, it doesn't matter." Standing up straight, he visibly composed himself.

"Most of the guards have left earlier this night," he said solemnly, "so now would probably be the best time to get her."

Connor glanced over at Eleanor to see that she was frowning. She seemed to sense that he was looking at him, and shot him a disbelieving glance. Connor pressed his lips together and subtly shrugged before turning back to Fillian. Yes, it was very convenient that most of the guards had
apparently left immediately after getting Connor to agree to help him, but that did not necessarily mean anything.

"Alright," he said, "lead the way then."

Eleanor made a disappointed grunting noise beside him. Both Connor and Fillian ignored her. Fillian in fact was glowing with joy.

"It's this way," he said, turning on his heel and gesturing for them to come on, "you can both climb houses and stuff, right?"

Connor smirked.

"Of course."

Dashing across the New York skyline was an experience that Connor would never get tired of. The sound of blood rushing through his head, the burn in his lungs and muscles, he had never found anything that would replace the sheer joy of feeling his body work.

"Hey! Get down, now!"

Or the joy of dodging the rooftop guards.

A bullet whizzed by his head as he jumped across the gap between two houses. Despite himself, he couldn't help but let out a quiet laugh as the angry shouts receded in the distance. Ahead of him, the small figure of Fillian continued to barrel along. Twisting and jumping almost as well as Connor, the younger boy stayed a steady few paces ahead of them, something that he hadn't expected. In the parts of his mind not taken up with keeping track of where he was going, he wondered where Fillian had been taught to run.

Then they were coming up to a road and Connor didn't have time to wonder anymore.

Uselessly, he stretched his arm out to stop Fillian. Talented as the boy was, there was no way he would be able to make the jump. But even as Connor opened his mouth to shout a warning, a gleam of metal under the moonlight caught his eye.

With a flick of his wrist, a long bar of metal ending in a hook slid out from Fillian's tattered sleeve. Smoothly, as if he had done it a thousand times before, he reached out the hook into the air and jumped. For a moment, he hung in the air like a bird, his loose sleeves billowing in the night air and looking like wings; then his hook caught the clothesline that was strung between the opposite building on the street.

Connor was close enough to hear his grunt as his body was quickly snapped into a more vertical position with his knees drawn to his chest. Watching in fascination as he jumped and caught himself on siding of the opposite building, Fillian glided across the thin ropes of the clothesline and hit the wall beside him feet first. Quickly grasping a crack between the planks on the wall, he unhooked his hook and jumped right up the side of the building, using the gleaming metal to catch the edge of the roof and pull himself up.

"Shit," said Eleanor, landing on his other side, "didn't see that coming."

Connor couldn't help but agree.

The townhouse where Fillian's sister was being held wasn't far from that jump. When Connor and
Eleanor caught up with Fillian, they found him crouched behind the rough brick of a chimney, staring down into the yard below and rubbing his hook.

Crouching down beside him, Connor peered into the dark yard as well, trying to pick out which house the girl was in.

"Christ," came Eleanor's mutter from behind him, "what a dump."

Glancing over his shoulder, Connor saw her looking around with her hands on her hips. As irritating at her words were, he couldn't help but agree with her.

The neighbourhood that they were in was one of the more rundown ones. The houses here were more like apartment buildings, rundown and battered by years of weather and poor upkeep until rich landlords bought them out from their previous owners at rock-bottom prices and divided the rooms into tiny apartments that they rented to recent immigrant families for exorbitant fees. The renters lived in tiny apartments in terrible conditions, forced to work long hours and grow their own food in the tiny gardens that they were allowed in their backyards.

Beside him, Fillian grunted.

"Still nicer than anywhere my sister and I stayed before," he said, squinting into the darkness. Connor blinked. How much worse could housing get before it was no longer housing?

Reaching up, the younger boy, oblivious to Connor's questions, tugged on his lower lip for a second before pointing at one particular house, no different from its neighbours in the darkness.

"That one," he said confidently, "that's the house my sister's being held in. She's in the room with the candle in the window."

Connor had to squint to see the tiny light that Fillian was pointing to. The light was barely visible through the window that Fillian had gestured to, with either the grime of the neighbourhood or a thick curtain blocking most of it. In one corner, though, it seemed that the glass in the window had been cleaned, and from it a flickering gleam that could only have come from a candle shone forth.

There was another light, though. Frowning, Connor caught the faint glow of embers from a pipe down below in front of what could only be the back door. Squinting in the moonlight, he could barely make anything out, a large tree casting the house mostly in shadow. Switching to his second sight, though, had two men in front of the house glowing a bloody red and leaving the taste of dirt and sickness on Connor's tongue.

Leaning back behind the rough brick of the chimney, he squeezed the knuckles of one hand and tried to think.

"How many you see?" asked Eleanor in a rough, nervous voice.

"Two," Connor murmured, "in front of the door. I don't know how many in the building itself."

Eleanor grunted and turned towards Fillian.

"You figure how many were left in your surveillance?" she asked.

Fillian, his eyes wide and shining in the moonlight, shook his head.

"No, I ran to you as soon as I saw a big group leave," he said, keeping his voice down.
Eleanor growled and looked at Connor, raising her eyebrows. Connor ignored her and switched back to his second sight. The soft sound of a door opening had caught his attention. Behind him, he tried to ignore it as Eleanor began to hiss insults at Fillian.

As he watched, another red figure slipped out of the door and joined the two crouching in front of the steps, seemingly bumming a match and some tobacco off of the man with the pipe. Pulling out his own, he lit it and threw the match to the ground, stomping it out as he took his first puff. After breathing it out, Connor could see him turn as if he was talking to the others.

"I'm going to listen in on them," he said abruptly, stopping Eleanor in mid-insult.

"What?!" she loudly whispered at him, incredulous.

"They're talking and I need to know how many men are there," he said simply. Dodging her attempts to grab the scruff of his coat, he jumped over to the next house beside them and quickly and quietly darted across the loose shingles of the roofs until he was close enough to hear what the men were saying. Peering around a jutting attic window, he cocked his ears and kept his second sight up as best he could.

"- fucking bitch, screamin' like she swallowed glass or somefin' whenever we go near 'er. Can't do shit to her 'cause all the neighbours come runnin'. This entire things a bloody waste of time if you ask me," said the man who had come out of the house. His voice was low and rough like the elders who had smoked too much tobacco over the years. Connor mentally dubbed him Thug One.

The man that had been smoking his pipe when they had arrived spoke next.

"Don't complain," he said, sounding slightly older than Thug One, "it's easy money, and better than that constant drilling back at camp. Even got new duds that we can sell after this."

The third thug laughed at this, his giggles uneven enough to hint at what he had been doing while guarding the house.

"Nice duds too," he slurried, "all fancy and right proper. Sticks out like a sore thumb out here, but gets you some good attention."

The pipe-smoking thug, Thug Two, snorted.

"Right," he drawled, "because that hatchet-face you been fucking while her husband's away is a real catch."

Thug Three snorted.

"S'all the same below the skirts," he said, "an' she's willin' to bite the pillow."

Connor rolled his eyes at their choice of topic. Really? Was that all colonist men were ever concerned about?

"Pity the bitch upstairs ain't willin' for a quick roll in the hay; wouldn't need her facin' away t'get hard."

Connor tensed. They were talking about Fillian's sister again! He leaned forward a little more to hear better.

"Oh, aye, but ye'd never fit, what with the broom already up there an' such." Thug Two leaned forward, as if sharing a secret. "Did you know," he said, "I offered to get her a little treat in return
for a quick lay, and she said I wasn't rich enough for her?"

His two friends snorted.

"Aye, she did! An' I wanted to ask her if she had any clue the situation she was in! I mean, she ain't no noble lady!"

Thug One snorted and shook his head.

"Fuckin' whore, man. Fuckin' whores." He puffed on his pipe. "Least she ain't our problem no more. Bossman's movin' her tonight to a warehouse. Really gonna put the screws on her. We'll get a chance with her then."

Connor tensed as the men below giggled and nudged each other. Glancing across the way, he could make out the blue glows of Fillian and Eleanor.

This changed everything.

Luckily, by the time he had made it back to the two of them, they had apparently made up their differences. Or, Connor thought wryly, looking closer at how they were carefully angled away from each other, they had agreed to disagree.

Plopping down in front of the two of them, he said without preamble, "They are moving your sister tonight to a different location. One where they will not be caught when they torture her. We can either follow them to this new location and then plan out an attack, or try to free her en-route to the new location."

"You have to save her now!" Fillian blurted out immediately.

"He doesn't have to do anything," Eleanor said sharply. Turning towards Connor, she peered at him closely. "It might be easier to get her away from them while they're transporting her, but you we don't have any exit plan. It would be better to wait until she's at the new location, then case that place."

"I know that," Connor said softly, doing his best to ignore Fillian's horrified gasp. Squeezing his knuckles, he turned the two possibilities over in his mind.

Eleanor's plan was the better one. She made a good point in that they had no idea what they were going to do after removing Fillian's sister from the man keeping her prisoner. There was also the added complication that they did not know how many men the 'bossman' would be bringing with him to help move her. The man squatting by the door were regulars at least, judging from their words, and even if they were not the best soldiers, they still knew how to properly fire a musket. It only took one bullet to kill.

But something in Connor's stomach twisted at the thought of leaving someone to be tortured. He knew what would likely be the first thing to be done to her when they got her to the new location; the guards had certainly seemed to be looking forward to it. His gorge rose at the thought of knowingly allowing such a thing to happen when he could stop it.

Fillian was staring at him pleadingly with his large brown eyes. Memories of what he had said about her 'doing things' to keep him safe and fed rose up.

Had he not just lectured Eleanor not even an hour ago about not looking down upon those that did such things to survive?

Biting the inside of his cheek, Connor knew that he had already made up his mind.
"We will attack while they are transporting -" he glanced towards Fillian.

"Gillian."

"- Gillian. Eleanor, do you have smoke-bombs?"

Eleanor was glaring at him, looking as if he had insulted her mother. Connor held her gaze steadily.

"...Yes," she finally ground out, looking like she was chewing a slug.

"Alright. Once they bring her out the door, we will attack." Leaning backwards, Connor began to point at the different parts of the yard.

"Eleanor, you will be on the roof. I will need you to drop a smoke bomb as soon as they come out of the door with her. Once it has detonated, I will go in and remove her from the group. Fillian, you will keep an eye out for any reinforcements. We will leave by that alleyway and head to the roofs as soon as possible. We will head to Trinity Church. Once we are there, we will decide what our next actions will be."

He looked sternly at his two partners. He could hear his blood in his ears.

This was not practice. They could die.

He pressed his lips together and squeezed his knuckles one more time.

No. They would not die.

The two of them seemed to hear the seriousness in his voice and didn't argue. All they did was nod.

He would not allow them to die.
Of course, things immediately went wrong.

The first part of the plan went well. Both Eleanor and Fillian were in position by the time the men dragged Gillian out of the building. Even from where he was standing, Connor could hear the jeers towards her as she was bundled out of the house, wrapped in a dirty grey sheet and flanked on both sides by large muscular men.

Eleanor threw her bomb down, and it exploded, covering the small courtyard with smoke. Focusing and turning on his second sight, Connor saw the glowing red men flanking Gillian loosen their grips on her arms, turning away to cover their faces and cough. As they did, Connor jumped down from the roof, landing in a cart full of vegetable trimmings. Without even pausing to catch his breath, he flipped out of it, still keeping an eye on the red figures surrounding them.

Gillian glowed gold beneath his gaze. She was coughing too as he darted towards her, dodging the swaying figures of her guards. As he grabbed her wrist, she yelped.

Dragging her close, he whispered in her ear, "I am a friend, come with me!"

Without further preamble, he began to drag her behind him towards the entrance of the alleyway until a shriek in his ear stopped him.

Looking back, Connor saw Gillian pressing her free hand to her hip. Glancing up at her face, twisted in pain, he realized what must have happened. One of the guards, in a fit of temper or during her capture, must have struck her and injured her hip and leg, preventing her from getting away. And from how hard she was biting her lower lip, she must have been struck hard.

But the smoke was beginning to clear, and they needed to get away. Looking around, Connor saw that some of the men's coughing was easing. Gritting his teeth, he realized that if he wanted to get out of there with Gillian, he would have to carry her.

Pulling Gillian close, he ignored her small fists beating at him and hauled her into his arms. She stank from her captivity, her hair half pinned up and half tumbling down, her short shift torn and filthy. Clearly, she had not been allowed to bathe or otherwise clean herself.

Connor, however, was more interested in getting away from the still-coughing men as fast as he could than he was in what Gillian was wearing. Bursting from the smoke cloud, he dropped his second sight as soon as the small figure of Fillian at the mouth of the alleyway came into view.

"What's wrong with her?" he cried, dashing towards the two of them.

"Keep moving!" snapped Connor, "We still have to escape!"

Shouldering past the younger boy, he continued to run. Behind him, he could hear the confused shouts of the men as they realized that someone had nabbed their prize and was trying to get away with it. Clenching his jaw even harder, Connor willed himself to run faster. They couldn't afford to be caught.

With the men's yells echoing behind them, he ran down more alleyways, Fillian close on his heels.
Eleanor jumped down from the roof where she had been following them after a few alleyways, hitting the ground running.

"What's with her?" she asked, her arms pumping, "She injured?"

"Yes, I am!" Gillian snapped, her face drawn from all of the jostling. Connor grimaced, his eyes scanning for somewhere they could hide. Her voice was thin with pain, but had a husky, womanly tone to it. In his arms, she was incredibly light. He could feel her ribs, even through her stays, and Connor suspected that on the whole, she probably resembled her brother in terms of boniness. If that was the case, then he didn't blame her for trying to blackmail her older lover for more money. She and her brother could definitely use more good meals.

"What's the new plan, then?" asked Eleanor, interrupting his musing. "This was your idea, after all."

Connor swallowed down a rather nasty comment and thought. As it was, they were essentially running around and trying to avoid any redcoats that might report back to Gillian's lover. As it was such a rundown part of the city, there were not a lot of regulars around. Behind them, though, Connor could hear faintly the shouts of their pursuers over the rushing of blood in his ears. The fact that Gillian could not take to the roofs with the rest of them had thrown Connor off of his plan, and now they needed to figure out a new one.

A particularly loud shout from behind them alerted them to the fact that they had been found.

"Now would be a good time to share, Connor!" Eleanor shouted in his ear. Out of the corner of his eye, Connor could see her throw a throwing knife. A short cry of pain, suddenly cut off, told him that the man had been dealt with.

Reaching another courtyard between houses, Connor stopped and looked around wildly, trying to figure out where they would go next. His eyes alight upon what looked like the entrance to a root cellar.

"There!" he said, dashing towards it, "we'll go in the tunnels towards my house!"

Shifting Gillian so that she was hanging over his shoulder, he quickly flung the doors to the tunnels open.

"Get in!" he said to Eleanor and Fillian, "See if there's a lantern or not!"

The jumped in unhesitatingly, with him following and closing the doors behind them. Just as he turned to continue down the stairs, he heard the shouts and a dog barking as their pursuers arrived.

Carefully, with Gillian's bony fingers digging into his shoulders, he tiptoed his way down the stairs to the door leading to the tunnel, trying not to make any noise that would attract the attention of the men shouting outside.

The short corridor leading up to the door that opened into the tunnels proper was extremely dusty and moldy. Wrinkling his nose to stop a sneeze, Connor squinted, trying to make out Eleanor and Fillian in the darkness. The black was thick and complete, with only a few stray beams of moonlight slipping through chinks in the doors above his head.

After a few quick and quiet steps more, he began to make out shapes in what little light there was. There was very little to see in this part of the tunnel; smugglers and the other users of the tunnels preferred to keep their goods further in, behind the labeled doors that told what part of the city that they lead to. There was only a little trash on the floor, and the occasional bit of loose rock.
In his arms, Gillian shifted and let out a small gasp. Connor glanced down at her, despite being barely able to see her face in the darkness. He could feel the tension in her body, but did not dare ask if she was okay. Not yet, while they were still so close to the entrance.

Turning a corner, he spotted a small bit of light. It was golden and flickering, like candlelight, and outlined the seams of a door up ahead. He broke into a trot. Once they were behind that door, he could stop for a second and get a better idea of Gillian's injury, and whether or not he could treat it down here.

The hinges of the door were blessedly quiet. Connor supposed that smugglers were to thank for that; after all, hinges squealing where there should be no hinges was bound to attract attention that they could not afford. Right now, though, as he slipped through the doorway and spotted Eleanor lighting up an old lantern from the wall sconce, he was just glad that it kept their pursuers from knowing where they were going.

Once the door closed behind him, Fillian jumped up from where he had been sitting on an old rickety table.

"Gillian," he breathed, looking as if he expected her to disappear at any moment, "are you alright?"

In his arms, Gillian wriggled slightly. Connor obligingly put her down gently, feet first. Now that they were in better light, for the first time Connor was able to see her properly. She was tall for a girl, he noted, with a bright red mop of wavy hair that was half pinned up haphazardly with brass pins, the rest of the curls falling down around her ears and into her green eyes. She was wearing a plain linen shift that ended above her knees and no shoes. The rough-looking fabric blended in against her pale skin, making her almost look naked at first glance. For a moment, she swayed, until she straightened herself and dusted the front of her dress off.

"I'm fine, Filly," she said, "just a little shook up."

Connor didn't think that he was supposed to, but he could see her eyes darting between him and Eleanor, who was now standing by the doorway deeper into the tunnels with the lantern dangling from her fingers.

Fillian looked doubtful of her statement.

"But you couldn't walk," he insisted, his eyebrows knotting together, "that's not okay, Lee-Lee."

"I'm fine!"

Yes, her eyes were definitely darting between him and Eleanor. Deciding to defuse her fears, Connor took a step forward.

"It is alright to admit that you are injured, Miss Gillian," he said, "you are amongst friends here."

Eleanor snorted.

"What Connor means," she said coolly, "is that your baby brother here managed to convince my bleeding heart of a friend that he should come and play hero to rescue you. Now how about we stop the chit-chat and get moving? We're still too close to your pursuers and it's only a matter of time before they find the entrance to the tunnels themselves."

Connor frowned. As right as Eleanor was about the pursuers, she still could have put it better. Glancing at the siblings, he saw in their faces that they thought the same thing. Opening his arms, though, he swept Gillian back into his arms. She went up with a squeak, wrapping her pale bare
arms around his neck.

"Alright then," he said, "lead the way."

Squelching through the damp tunnels with only one flickering lantern and a girl in his arms was not a situation that Connor thought that he would be in when he had returned to New York a week ago. Then again, he had not thought that he would commit his first murder a week ago, either. With Fillian trotting at his heels and Eleanor ahead of him, the whole situation was rather surreal as they followed the twists and turns of the tunnels, heading inexorably northward, towards his father's house.

As they walked, Connor found himself wondering what, precisely, he would do after they reached his home. His mind churned and ran in circles, trying to come up with something that would actually work. His father was a particularly big hurdle to jump, as he would undoubtedly come looking for him if Connor wasn't in bed when he came back home from his nightly meeting.

And that was if he didn't end up learning about the siblings anyways. His father had given Connor a lot of affection and attention over the years, and Connor knew that he would not like a pair of siblings he had met when one had tried to blackmail him.

He was pulled out of his mulling when they reached a locked metal door. Set deep in the brickwork, the door itself look rusted and damp, much like the walls that stretched up above their heads. Tipping his head back, Connor looked for openings and other ways past the door. The only way he could see was far above their heads, near the roof and looking like a terrible squeeze.

Eleanor tugged at the door for a moment, grunting, and turned back towards him and the siblings.

"It's locked. Which one of you can climb well enough to open it?"

Connor wrinkled his brows.

"Can you not do it?" he asked. Eleanor was certainly almost as talented as him at climbing and running. Looking her from head to toe, he quickly spotted an odd, damp-looking patch on her side and frowned.

"You are injured," he stated flatly, "and you did not tell me."

Eleanor shrugged infuriatingly.

"You seemed busy with your new buddy there," she said, "and the guy who tried to gut me with a bayonet is looking a damn sight worse than me. I didn't think it was worth mentioning."

"Any injuries are worth reporting," Connor protested.

Eleanor held up a hand to stop him.

"Whatever, it's done, and we're wasting time arguing."

Growling, Connor gently put Gillian down on the ground.

"As soon as we are through, we are stopping and treating that," he said, pointing at her as he headed towards the first set of handholds he had spotted in the wall, "and we are looking at Miss Gillian's hip."

Eleanor made a dismissive hand gesture.
"Just climb."

True to his words, Connor insisted that they sit down on a convenient stack of boxes in the next room and do a wound check before they moved on any more. Eleanor submitted with poor grace, muttering oaths under her breath, but when he gestured for her to lift her shirt, she did so with a wince that showed just how painful the injury was.

And it was quite an injury. It looked like bayonet slice, and stretched from the bottom of her rib cage to just past the start of her hips. Touching it gently, Connor held the lantern closer and poked it, trying to see how deep it was. Eleanor hissed.

"That hurts, you know," she snapped.

Connor tried not to roll his eyes.

"I am aware," he said, "but I need to see if this will need a doctor or if it just needs to be wrapped up."

"It's fine, my vest to the brunt of it and it's stopped bleeding, so stop poking it!"

"How did you even get this?"

"A goon got a lucky swipe in with his bayonet while we were running, now stop. Touching it."

Giving up the fight against rolling his eyes, Connor stood up.

"Alright," he sighed, "now how about you, Miss Gillian?"

Fillian and Gillian looked up from where they had been sitting on another crate with their heads together. Sitting together, Connor could see the family resemblance between the two of them.

Gillian smoothed her shift in what looked like an unconscious movement.

"I'm fine," she said flatly.

Connor narrowed his eyes.

"If you are fine, then why did I have to carry you all the way here?"

The red-haired girl flushed.

"Look," she said testily, "I've been being pawed over and leered at for a week. Forgive me for not wanting a repeat of such things, especially since I doubt you're an actual doctor."

Connor softened a little at her words, despite the bite to them. Her words revealed a good reason for her reticence.

"I am sorry that such things happened to you, but I should still check and make sure that nothing is broken," he said, placing the lantern down beside her. "If it is broken, I could end up crippling you by carrying you incorrectly."

Gillian didn't look convinced.

"Believe me, I'd be screaming a lot more if it was broken," she said.
Connor crouched down.

"I am not so sure," he said, reaching out, "I have seen several men simply shrug off broken fingers and ankles, believing them to be mere sprains."

Glancing up, he saw her lips tighten momentarily before relaxing.

"Fine then," she said, sounding resigned, "Grope me all you'd like."

Connor felt his cheeks heat up at her words. He wanted to protest that it was not like that, that he was not even sure he could feel that way towards another person so soon after meeting them, but he knew from experience in trying to explain to Hickey and his other uncles his seeming disinterest in romance that it would not work. The blank stares that he had gotten from them had been disheartening and made him wonder if something was wrong with him for the longest time. It wasn't until Uncle Charles had taken him aside and pointed out that such a lack of interest was a blessing, keeping him from getting distracted by women in his future duties as a Templar, that the sick, knotted feeling in his stomach had gone away.

Feeling Gillian's hip, he didn't find any of the tell-tale bumps or squishiness that signified a broken bone. Looking up at her, he saw that she was pale and shaking whenever he touched a certain part of the hip. Leaning back, he rested his arms on his thighs.

"It does not feel like anything is broken," he said reluctantly, "but may I ask how you were injured?"

Gillian visibly clenched her jaw.

"Guard hit it when I said his mother was a French whore," she muttered. A squawk of laughter emanated from where Eleanor was sitting that both of them ignored.

Connor raised an eyebrow.

Resembling a tomato at this point, Gillian elaborated.

"He was trying to convince me that he'd get me 'something nice' if I let him fuck me. I told him he wasn't rich enough to afford me." She shrugged. "He didn't like that."

Connor tried to keep any expression from his face. Standing up, he brushed himself off.

"How did you even get into such a situation?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"I stole a weird, glowing thing from my previous employer and tried to blackmail him."

Connor looked at her. She didn't look particularly ashamed, but still squirmed slightly under his gaze.

"Fucker was going to throw me out because I got my period for the first time. Said it meant I was too old for him. I wouldn't be able to find another guy who like 'em young before winter set in, so when I saw this weird shiny cube in his desk one day, and him stroking it like some sort of pet, I stole and hid it. I figured that he'd be willing to pay enough money to get me and my brother through the winter to get it back." She shrugged again and looked forcibly nonchalant. "He wanted it back alright, but he wasn't willing to pay, and I quote here, "some little cock-gobbling gutter-slut" any money for it."

"How did he capture you, then?"
"Set up a fake money drop. Had guards standing by when I came to pick it up. He only called me a gutter-slut once I was in that house, you understand?"

"And you didn't have any parents or anything?" Eleanor interrupted rudely. "Someone who'd keep you out of trouble?"

The flash of pure hatred at the mention of parents that appeared on Gillian's face made Connor take a step back.

"Dead and rotting in hell," she snapped, her hands fisting in her ragged shift.

That pronunciation left them silent for a little while. Connor fiddled with his hands. Judging from her tone, she wouldn't appreciate anything that expressed condolences for the death of her parents, but he still felt that he should say something.

Luckily, Fillian spoke before he did.

"They, um, died when I was really young; it's been a long time since there was anyone other than me and my sister," he said, rubbing his arm. He turned and looked at Gillian, his face softening. "Gillian's the only mother I've ever been able to remember."

A similar softening happened to Gillian's face as well. She slung an arm across his shoulders and pulled him close to her, laying her head on top of his.

"Us against the world," she murmured, like it was an old saying between the two of them.

"Us against the world," Fillian repeated, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Connor's heart ached. The love between the two of them was so obvious it almost made looking at them feel obscene. Looking over at Eleanor, though, he was disheartened to see that she was nowhere near as impressed as he was by their devotion towards each other.

"Well, as cute as this love-fest is," she drawled, "we should keep moving."

Gillian scowled at her, clearly irritated at her moment with her brother being interrupted.

"Fine," she snapped, "but I'll still need to be carried."

Eleanor grunted and stood up.

"Connor?" she said.

He sighed and picked Gillian up. She was very light in his arms. Winding her own pair of arms around his neck, she settled into a comfortable position.

On a whim, Connor activated his second sight and pushed it into his eagle-eye view. He froze.

There was red. All around them. Heading towards them.

"Eleanor," he snapped.

"What."

"We're surrounded."

"What."
"How do you know that?" Gillian demanded.

"I have special eyes," Connor said absentmindedly, looking around the room. Where could they hold a position?

Aside from a few crates, there wasn't much in the room. Just their lantern and them, really. Connor gritted his teeth.

"Miss Gillian?" he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "I am going to put you down. I am going to need my hands free to fight."

He could feel the tension coiled through her body. She felt like a taut bowstring, vibrating and ready to release, but she nodded.

"Do what you need to do."

He placed her gently on the ground. Eleanor had already moved to cover his back, pulling out her own sword. Fillian had pulled out his hook as well.

"I'll fight as well," he said, his eyes shining with determination. Connor didn't argue with him. With the amount of red that he had seen, they would need all of the help they could get.

Pulling out his own sword, he settled into a ready position and looked down the long, dark hallway. Behind him, he heard Eleanor doing the same.

They stood there, with only the sound of their breathing breaking the silence. Connor strained his ears for any sound at all.

At first, all he heard was squeaking from the rats that were everywhere in New York. Then came footsteps, many of them, coming closer with every beat of his heart. Shifting back into his second sight, Connor squinted into the darkness, trying to see anything.

The corridor was outlined in white. Deep in the darkness, Connor thought he saw a glimpse of red.

Then a teeth-rattling boom rocked through his ears, and something hit the ground in front of him, spewing smoke and hissing loudly. Immediately, Connor covered his nose with his sleeve, his eyes watering and his ears ringing. Then there was another boom and another loud hiss joined the first. Connor looked around wildly. What was that gas? It smelled slightly sweet, coating the back of his throat and burning.

Someone fell to the ground behind him with a thump. Connor looked over his shoulder to see Fillian on the ground. Gillian was already lying still on the ground. Eleanor was swaying. He himself was feeling dizzy.

Sleeping gas.

It felt like he was moving through molasses. Helplessly, he watched as Eleanor fell as well, joining Fillian and Gillian on the ground. Darkness began to creep into his vision. His legs began to tremble and his ears filled with a roaring sound.

Distantly, as he collapsed to the ground, he heard footsteps.
So, two things tonight, people.

1) The title of the fic comes from the poem "A Poison Tree" by William Blake. In it, he talks about how his anger and hate is repressed when faced with his foe, but easily expressed to his friends.

2) Please, if you read, do not be afraid to comment! It doesn't have to be in-depth, even just a comment on a particular part that you liked keeps me going.
Connor awoke, his senses returning to him in drips and drabs. First came the scent of smoke and sweat, the filth of soldiers everywhere. Next he tasted copper and salt in his mouth, and saw the darkness behind his eyelids. There was a warmth at his back and a roughness under his cheek, broken up with soft silkiness that smelt like the soap Eleanor had always favoured. Then the sound of a man, muffled as if Connor was hearing him through water, crested over him like a wave and snapped into perfect clarity.

"Oh, my dear little girl," the man was mockingly purring, "did you really think that you would be able to get away from me after your disobedience."

"You don't own me, bastard, especially not after you threw me out. Disobedience isn't the right word."

Connor had to force himself to not tense. Gillian's voice, despite the defiance in her words, was thin and pained. Cracking open his eyes, he risked a quick glance. Boots, so cheaply made that he could see the stitching coming undone, dominated his vision. At least two men, then, were standing with their backs to him. From his place on the floor with rough wood rubbing against his cheek, he could just barely see Gillian and the man she was speaking to.

The red-headed girl was held up by two large, burly men, their massive paws clamped tightly around her upper arms. She hung limply from them, her feet just barely brushing the ground and her face swollen and darkening with bruises. Despite the position she was in, her face was thunderous.

Connor could only see the back of the man who was talking to her. His hair was brown and tied back in a ponytail with a black ribbon. His body was average, running slightly to fat. Utterly unmemorable, which immediately put him on his guard. Men like that were often the most dangerous, as they could get away with more easier.

The man reached out with a meaty hand and stroked Gillian's cheek gently.

"Oh, my little Gillian," he said, "my sweet little slut." Connor watched as he dug his fingers into her cheeks. "Don't argue with me."

He took a step back and spread his arms.

"This world," he said, mock-patiently, "is founded on certain principles. And the first among these principles, is submission to one's betters. You are a gutterslut; I am a Captain in His Majesty's Army. You must submit to me, and stealing my belongings is not proper submissive behaviour, now is it?"

What? Connor nearly frowned in confusion. What was this talk about submission? And how could this man say that he was better than the woman that he had been having sex with?

Connor was not the most worldly person, he knew, but he also knew that one did not need to be a particularly worldly person to pick out the hypocrisy in someone's words. It didn't take a genius to realize that the man speaking was the same man that had been Gillian's customer.
There was no way that he had not known how young Gillian was when he took her into his house. She had said earlier that he had kicked her out for getting her period. So how was it that a man, who was willing to take advantage of a girl in a desperate situation and extort her for sexual favours in return for money, claim that he was better than her?

Gillian seemed to agree, and snorted.

"Submission, is it?" she sneered, "Tell me, is that in all parts of one's life? Because if I recall correctly, I was not the submissive one when we were fucking in your wife's bed. No," and Connor could see a flash of white teeth in her bruised face, "you were the one begging for me to ride you harder. Faster. Because you were too tired to properly fuck me. You can't exactly blame me if my little girly brain got all confused."

The silence that curled through the room at that was deadly.

"Well, gentlemen," the man said, his voice as cold as arctic air, "if that's how she feels, perhaps you would assist me in reminding this little whore of her place in the world?"

A rumble of laughter ran through the room. The men in front of Connor began to move forward as a ripping noise filled the air. A sharp, feminine shriek filled the air, followed quickly by rough laughter and comments on Gillian's body.

Connor twitched. Only slightly, just enough to feel the smooth leather still hidden underneath the long sleeves of his shirt, and the skin-warmed metal that it housed. Carefully looking, he tried to judge the distance between him and the man who was now watching amusedly as Gillian struggled against the groping hands of the guards. Could he kill this man for this? Before his guards took a notice and turned on him?

"You bastard!"

It was Gillian. Connor still didn't dare move his head. All he knew was that the other boy was somewhere behind him, also sounding like he had been beaten.

The man ignored him.

"F-fucking arseholes!" came Gillian's strained voice. "Smith! If you let them do this to me, you'll never learn where I hid it!"

The man stood where he was. Risking opening his eyes a little wider, Connor was able to see a little more.

The man's face was just as unremarkable and average as his body was. An oval face was framed with mouse-brown hair that lay flat against the man's, no, Smith's skull. His nose was neither long nor snubbed, his lips neither thick nor thin, his chin neither strong nor weak.

"Gillian," Smith said in a sickeningly paternal tone, "you weren't telling me where the item was before we started this little bit of unpleasantness; how is it that this is what will prevent me from finding it?" He gestured lazily at her. "You've proven yourself most stubborn; you need to be taught your place in the world. Once you've accepted this, you will tell me where it is anyways, because your better has asked you."

Connor gritted his teeth at the man's arrogance. Teaching someone a lesson on their place in the world? Who was he to say what anyone's place in the world was? Things were never simple! It could be argued that Connor's place in the world was back in his village, but it could equally be argued that his place was beside his father!
Smith strolled towards where Connor and Eleanor were lying, causing Connor to hurriedly close his eyes again. His slow, steady steps stopped just in front of him, close enough for him to smell the leather of Smith's boots.

"And besides, even if you do not talk after the men are done with you, I can always start in on your rescuers."

Behind him, Connor felt Eleanor tense.

"I mean really, sweetie, what possessed you to try and convince someone to rescue you, of all people? Did you think that you were like some princess in a tower, waiting to be saved by some prince? If you did, then let me remind you of what you really are: a whore. And whores don't get happy endings, Gillian. Especially when they start as young as you."

Connor felt something warm and wet running down his wrists and pooling underneath his hidden blades. He was standing, now, his eyes wide open and ears filled with the strangely familiar sound of choking and everyone in the room was staring at him.

Oh, he thought, staring at the bleeding and dying man impaled upon his hidden blades, that's what everyone is staring at.

He swallowed.

For several moments, there was silence in the room, broken only by Captain Smith's dying gurgles.

Glancing around, Connor felt a sinking feeling in stomach. There were more men in the room than he had realized. Four men, including the two that had been in front of him when he woke up were holding Gillian down against the ground, with a fifth between her legs. Two others were guarding the entrances to the room, leaning on their guns. Finally, there was one more man, his grimy hand tangled in Fillian's shaggy mop of hair.

Captain Smith, still twitching and gurgling in his death throes, slowly slid off of Connor's blade. He hit the ground with a dull, wet thump.

The sound of Captain Smith hitting the ground acted like a starting bell. The men that had been holding Gillian to the ground, their belts hanging undone around their hips, growled.

"He just killed the boss," the one kneeling between Gillian's legs snarled, and with a roar they lurched forward.

Connor sheathed his hidden blades and pulled out his sword, cursing the fact that he hadn't brought his pistol, when something bright and silvery whipped past his eye. The man closest to him fell to his knees, gurgling and clutching his throat as his shirt suddenly bloomed red.

"Christ almighty, Connor," came Eleanor's usual irritated growl, "would it have killed you to wait until everyone was distracted?"

Connor turned and just managed to parry a stab from a bayonet.

"My apologies," he said tightly, "but they were going to harm Miss Gillian, and that was unacceptable."

Eleanor snorted and pulled out her own sword.

A spray of blood filled the air as Connor slipped through the guard's defenses and jammed the tip
of his sword into his dirty throat. The guard's partner shouted and tried to stab at him with a bayonet that Connor dodged. A quick slice sent him reeling back and clutching his face. Another had him on the floor with his friend, gurgling out his last breaths.

Another guard nearly got through to Connor, forcing him to jump back to avoid getting impaled. He was snarling, his cheap-looking clothes bulging at the seams as he tried to stab Connor again. Connor grit his teeth. There wasn't enough room to properly maneuver. The bodies on the ground were dangerous too, nearly tripping him up.

A body fell against the man he was fighting against, making him stumble and his bayonet waver. Connor took his chance and shot forward, impaling the man through his heart. For a moment, he could have sworn that he could feel the man's heartbeat through the blade. Then he, too, slid off of his sword and fell to the ground.

Glancing over, he saw two more bodies on the ground, more knives in their throats. That made seven of the eight men dead.

A shriek answered where the eighth man was. Still with his hand firmly holding onto Fillian's hair, he was now holding a sword to the young boy's throat.

"You fucking scum," he hissed, his eyes wild, "you think you'll get away with this? With killing Her servants?"

Connor could hear the capital H in the man's pronunciation of 'Her'. He couldn't bring himself to care, though, with Fillian twisting in the man's grip with tears in the corners of his eyes. Glaring at the man, he gripped the hilt of the sword tightly.

"Who is she?" he asked, trying to slowly come closer. The man's eyes narrowed and he pressed the blade closer to Fillian's throat. The boy whimpered as a red line appeared.

"She who once ruled and will rule again!" the man hissed. The whites of his eyes were visible all around the iris as he shifted from foot to foot. "She of the First Will, the only Will, that we have strayed from and forgotten! She will not forget those who rebelled against her and subverted our perfect submission!"

Connor absentmindedly filed the madman's words away, keeping his eyes locked on the man rocking from foot to foot in agitation. The moment that his sword moved away from Fillian's throat he would strike.

A sparkle from the man's collar momentarily caught his attention. An odd necklace was hanging from his neck, shaped like an upside-down cross with a star at the top. Keeping his head still, he glanced down at the bodies between him and the man. Similar necklaces, covered in blood, lay on the ground where they had been cut from the men's throats as he had slit them.

Pressing his lips together, he refocused back on the ranting man. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eleanor flipping a throwing knife in one hand, similarly focused.

"You've ruined it," the man was muttering now, "you've ruined it all."

And there. The man's sword lowered slightly from Fillian's neck, and Connor surged forward, his sword held out and ready to stab the man in the heart.

But Fillian got there first. Quick as a flash of lightning across the sky during a summer storm, the long hook that he had used while running across the roofs on their way here fell out of his sleeve and bit into the man's forearm. With a slick ripping sound, it sliced through the muscles, veins and
tendons of the man's arm, causing blood to gush out like water being poured out of a pitcher and hit the wooden ground with wet slaps. The man screamed and let go of his sword, and then was silenced permanently by Connor's blade.

Silence, broken only by their harsh breathing, filled the room like a drop of ink filled a glass of water.

Eight men. Connor and Eleanor and even Fillian had, between them, killed eight men in this room alone. Wiping sweat from his forehead, Connor was tempted to laugh hysterically. Just two days ago, he had killed a man for the first time. And now he had just taken part in a massacre without a bit of doubt.

Fillian was staring at the dead body of the man, his hair falling in front of his eyes. Behind him, Connor heard Gillian getting up from the ground where she had been lying throughout the fight. Looking behind him, he watched as she limped over to them. Her arms were crossed in front of her chest, her shift torn open to expose her upper body to the world and now streaked with the blood of the men that had been killed. Connor averted his eyes and tried not to blush as she Shouldered past him and laid a hand on her brother's shoulder to comfort him.

Eleanor grunted.

"Well," she said, her voice inflectionless, "didn't expect that to happen."

Connor glanced back at her to see her gesturing at Fillian and shrugged. There wasn't much to say, really.

Letting out a pulse of his eagle-eyed vision, he was gratified to see no red at the edges of his vision. Sheathing his weapon, he cleared his throat to get the attention of the siblings, who were now holding hands and whispering together.

"We should get moving again," he said, his voice sounding too loud in the silent room. Gillian glanced up at him and merely nodded silently, while Fillian continued to stare at the ground.

Once they re-emerged from the tunnels, Connor felt a frisson of alarm travel down his spine. It was still dark, but at the distant horizon, he could see the very beginnings of a faint pink glow. They only had a limited time, now.

"For what?" asked Gillian, curled up in his arms.

Connor jumped a little. He hadn't realized that he had said that out loud.

"Yeah, Connor," asked Eleanor, "for what?" The little jerk she gave of her head towards the siblings made it very clear what she was talking about.

And she was not wrong. Connor realized that things that night had massively spiralled out of control, and now he was flying by the seat of his pants and had to figure out what he was going to do with Gillian and Fillian now that Gillian was free from her imprisonment.

Licking his dry lips, his mind churned. What could he do with the siblings? It was clear from the ranting of the man that their leader had been involved in something larger than that little group. That meant that it was likely that the siblings would not be safe being left alone in the city.

For a wild moment, he considered asking his father to take them on as servants. His father had always been kind and generous to the people that worked for them in their house, even throwing
out a visiting Templar from England who had attempted to assault a maid while he was staying with them. If the siblings were servants, then his father would extend the same protection to them, and they would be safe from reprisals.

Just as quickly, though, he dismissed the idea. How would he even explain them in the first place? "Hello, Rake:ni, this is Gillian and Fillian McCarthy. I just met them during a night-time stroll and thought that they would be great servants! Oh, the bruising? No, no, that is just from them tripping! An ear infection, I am told." There was no way his father would not ask questions about them, and he would not be happy about Connor going behind his back and nearly getting killed by a bunch of madmen in the tunnels that ran under the city. No, they would have to leave the city altogether to be safe.

A ship, then. Narrowing his eyes, Connor mentally counted the money that he still had left over from the summer. Since he had not ended up going to Ellen, his father had paid to have his clothes altered, meaning that he still had quite a lot of money just lying around.

Speaking of Ellen.

Connor eyed the siblings again. Gillian had taken his jacket thankfully when he had handed it to her, but she was still clad in nothing but a torn shift underneath it. A plan began to pull itself together in his mind.

"We will go to my house, first," he said quietly. "I have money left over from this summer. Then we will head to Ellen's to buy one of her ready-made dresses, and then I will buy you a ticket on the first ship going out today."

Eleanor pursed her lips. "Sounds do-able," she said, "But what are we supposed to do while you're getting the money?"

Connor bit the inside of his cheek. "I was hoping that you would guard them for just a few minutes while I am getting it," he admitted.

Eleanor pressed her lips together and let out an unimpressed huff of air from her nose.

"Really?" she said.

"Yes really," came the irritated snap from Gillian. She was clutching Connor's coat tightly around her body and glaring at the other girl with Fillian, who was clinging to Connor's hip.

Eleanor's gaze sharpened and she whirled on her heel to glare at the red-haired girl.

"Stay out of this, slut," she snarled.

Gillian narrowed her eyes.

"No," she said, her voice cold, "I won't. He's the only damn person in years to help me and my brother, and all I've seen you do tonight is criticize and insult him. So shut the fuck up."

Eleanor growled and placed her hand on the hilt of her sword.

"I criticize him," she snarled, "because he is risking everything for a whore and a beggar that he doesn't even know. Do you have any idea what his dad will do if he finds out that he went out and took a bunch of stupid risks like this? He only got those blades on his wrists because his dad thought he could be trusted with them!"
Gillian glared at her, her lips pressed together so tightly that they were white. Connor decided to intervene.

"Both of you, stop," he said, stepping between the two of them. "Eleanor, I have made my choices and I will deal with the consequences. Now will you guard them or not?"

Eleanor tossed her head and snorted like a horse.

"Fine, I will, so long as the slut keeps her mouth shut."

Gillian surged forward, nearly falling out of looking willing to get into a fight with the other girl even with her face darkening from bruises. The coat that Connor had given her fell open as she dug her fingers into his arm and shoulder. Connor blushed and averted his eyes again, staring straight ahead.

"We need to keep moving before we are discovered again," he reminded the group, ignoring his burning cheeks. He turned and began to walk, feeling gratified when a second later he heard the rest of them following him.

They trotted along the backstreets for a while, dodging late-night and early-morning patrols of Regulars. It wasn't until the buildings began to increase in size and thin out that Fillian spoke.

Speeding up until he was padding alongside Connor, the younger boy walked in silence beside him, chewing his lower lip.

"What did she mean about you getting those fancy knives on your wrists because your dad trusts you?" he asked after several long moments.

Connor looked down and shifted uncomfortably. Carrying Gillian, he could feel the steel blades on his wrists digging into his skin; he was very aware of their weight.

"...These blades," he said reluctantly, "have a history. Only certain types of people are supposed to have them. Trustworthy people. When my father gave them to me, it was him saying that he trusted me to act properly and not go do things like what I just did." Connor bit the inside of cheek. "I really respect my father. He is everything to me, he took me in when my mother was murdered and educated me and taught me how to fight and offered me a way to help my people." He looked down at the younger boy, the cuffs of his shirt stained a dark brown with dried blood. "I owe him everything that I have, and I do not think that he would approve of what I did tonight. If he finds out, I do not know what he will do as punishment for breaking his trust."

Fillian's brow furrowed.

"What does your dad do that you'd need to be taught stuff like that," he asked, jerking his chin at Connor's hidden blades. "You're talking about him like he's some sort of bigshot in the government."

Connor was nearly shocked into laughter at the sheer wrong-headedness of Fillian's statement. As it was, though, the lump of anxiety in the pit of his stomach managed to keep him under control.

"Not quite the government," he corrected softly, "more like a group of men and women who wish to bring order and justice to the colonies, and influence the world around them to do so."

Looking up, he spotted a familiar house up ahead.

"That is my house there," he said softly, "We will go in the back way."
Connor ended up having to climb over the walls in the back to unlock the gate so that Gillian could get through. The sky was still dark, but the pink fingers of dawn had lengthened as they walked and were already stretching across the sky as Eleanor and the siblings huddled in one of the stalls of the stables to wait. Gillian sat down on a pile of hay with Fillian squashed against her side, fiddling with the buttonholes of the coat, while Eleanor leaned back against the side of the stall and crossed her legs.

"I will return soon," Connor said as he slipped out of the stables, "Please do not attract any attention."

"No promises," said Eleanor.

Connor hurried across the empty courtyard with a heavy feeling in his heart. It was already far later than he had wanted it to be when he had first agreed to rescue Gillian. His father did not often rise this early in the morning, but judging from the sky he would be rising very soon. If Connor did not hurry and get the money quickly, then he could get caught by him.

Gently closing the door behind him, he passed through the kitchen and began to tiptoe his way towards the staircase to the upper levels. Gliding down the hallway silently, he was so intent on avoiding the creaky floorboards in the hall that he did not notice who was sitting in the parlour just off the staircase waiting for him.

"Son."

Connor jumped. Slowly turning around, the rock in his stomach sank to his feet.

His father was already awake and sitting in the parlour's main chair, his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap. Even from where he was standing, Connor could see the dark shadows underneath his eyes and the tension at the corners of his mouth.

"You look like you've had quite the night. Would you care to explain where you were?"

Chapter End Notes

Eyyyy, Daddy's not happy! Connor definitely wasn't expecting that!

Second to last chapter of the arc, guys. I hope you manage to survive the Saturday update!
Haytham gestured for Connor to sit down.

Connor sat.

Normally, there was some sort of fire crackling in the parlour, filling the room with light and warmth. Connor had spent many happy hours here as a child, reading books from the library with a cup of tea at his elbow in the more comfortable chairs.

But the fireplace now was cold and empty, filled only with ashes.

Perched on the edge of his chair, Connor felt as if someone had strung a violin with his nerves and was sawing away. Across from him, his father sat with his hands steepled in front of his face, his eyes colder than Connor could ever remember them being. The silence between them stretched out painfully, with Connor trying not to squirm as his father's gaze traveled across his body. He was horribly aware of the stains and tears that littered his clothing and shouted the story of what had gone on during the night to the skies.

"Well," Haytham finally murmured, "I don't suppose that you would mind explaining where exactly you have been tonight?"

Connor swallowed convulsively at his father's tone.

"Out," he said weakly, "just taking a stroll to clear my head."

"Really."

Connor couldn't help but flinch at his father's tone.

"Tell me, Connor," his father said, "when, precisely, did you begin to take five-hour long walks? Without even leaving a note?"

"...You came home early," Connor said slowly. He had expected his father to be gone the entire night.

"Yes, Connor, you see, proper Templars such as Shay Cormac do not, as it turns out, need to be constantly watched. Now," he said, making a short, jerky gesture, "I did not directly give you an order to stay in tonight, but I was working under the impression that you were not the type of boy to go off gallivanting across the city when his father was not home."

Connor shrank back in his chair.

"It was not gallivanting," he protested in a small voice.

"Really."

Connor heard the door in the kitchen open and close briefly before several sets of footsteps began to walk down the hardwood floors of the house. He squirmed in his chair. Would his father drag this out in front of someone? He hoped that he wouldn't. Usually his father was a very private man in all parts of his life, but sometimes he did like a touch of personal humiliation when punishing
"Sir," came the voice of one of the footmen, "I found these louts hanging around by the stables."

Connor jerked his head around. To his horror, he saw Eleanor and the McCarthys standing there, held in place by the broad-shouldered man. Eleanor's seeming boredom contrasted sharply with the tension in Gillian and Fillian's frames.

"I see," said Haytham as Connor turned back around. His eyes were glittering with anger. "Tell me, Connor, did these people happen to accompany you on your little five-hour stroll?"

Connor gulped. There was no point in lying now.

"Yes," he admitted in a very quiet voice.

His father put his hands down on the arms of his chair. Each movement was careful and economical, and Connor nearly trembled. Haytham only moved like that when he was really angry.

"Perhaps, then," he said, his tone falsely light, "they will be more communicable about what, precisely, your walk was like?"

Connor stiffened; that tone never meant anything good.

"No rake:ni!" he blurted out.

"No?" Haytham raised his eyebrows.

"No, rake:ni," he said, his mouth dry, "I will tell you why I left tonight."

His father settled back in his chair, his hands in his lap.

"I'm listening," he said dangerously.

Connor licked his lips and stared down at his hands, folded in his lap. Where should he start? With Fillian's attempted blackmail? That would just anger his father; he might throw them back onto the street in that case, where they would quickly be attacked again.

"Connor," came the warning tone of his father.

"Fillian contacted me earlier," Connor gulped, "about wanting help to save his sister from a group of men that were keeping her prisoner. I agreed, and Eleanor came along as back-up. It just took a little longer than I thought it would to get Gillian out of the hands of her captors."

Connor peered up at his father through his eyelashes. There. That was a fairly neutral retelling of the events of the night. Surely his father wouldn't get too angry, would he? "Do not lie to me Connor," his father said, his voice low.

He stood corrected.

Getting up from his seat, he began to prowl back in forth in front of Connor, every line in his body reminding the young man of nothing more than a stalking bobcat.

"It does not take a genius to see that you are hiding something from me," he growled, "How, precisely, did Fillian, someone that I have not seen or heard of before, convince you to help him rescue," and his lip curled at that, "his sister? What, precisely, complicated this so-called rescue to the point that it took you five hours to return home? Surely it was not that difficult to sneak past a
few drunken thugs hired from the nearest tavern-"

"They weren't thugs, they were Regulars!" piped Fillian.

Connor squeezed his eyes shut.

His father froze for a moment and then whirled on his heel.

"Oh, Regulars?" he snarled, stepping closer to Connor and bracing his hands on the arms of Connor's chair. "Tell me, Connor, when were you planning on letting that little tid-bit slip, hmm? That you were attacking the British soldiers stationed here?" Reaching out, he grabbed Connor's chin and forced him to look him in the eye. "Perhaps when they were knocking at my door, demanding that I hand over my son for punishment? Might you let me know who their commanding officer was, so that I may send the proper bribes along to keep him quiet?"

Haytham's fingers dug painfully into Connor's jaw, almost to the point that his eyes began to water. He had to bite his lip to keep from crying out.

Gillian, though, had nothing keeping her quiet.

"That won't happen," she said, stepping forward, "Captain Smith is dead, along with the men that he was using to keep me captive."

With their faces so close, Connor was easily able to see his father's pupils suddenly shrink and his jaw tighten. Dropping his hand back to the arm of Connor's chair, he closed his eyes, clearly reignining in his temper.

"Captain Smith of the 31st Regiment?" he asked, his eyes still closed as he raised his eyebrows.

Connor could hear the creaking as Gillian shifted from foot to foot. As it was, he did not dare turn to look.

"Er, yes," she said, sounding confused.

His father took a deep breath and let it out through his nose.

"John," he said, his voice deceptively mild, "please leave us."

"Yessir," said the footman, "would you like me to throw these miscreants out?"

"Just Eleanor, John, leave the other two here."

Connor heard the floorboards creak as the man began to drag Eleanor away.

His father stood up straight and straightened his cuffs.

"Come in and sit down," he ordered the others, he tone brooking no disobedience. Silently, Gillian and Fillian came in and did as he asked. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw that they were only perched at the edges of their chairs, clearly aware that they were not truly welcome.

Once they were settled in the room, the side of Connor's face exploded into pain.

His ears ringing and jaw aching, Connor reached up with shaking hands to touch the side of his face. It was hot underneath his fingers. He looked up at his father with wide eyes.

His father was shaking his hand as he looked down at him with enough contempt that Connor's
eyes burned. Swallowing any noise that might have escaped his mouth, Conner flinched as his father opened his mouth.

"Connor," he said, his voice tight with contained anger, "do you recall the name of the man who's party we went to not even three days ago? Do you recall his name?"

Connor worked his suddenly dry mouth for several seconds, feeling like a rabbit pinned beneath the gaze of a angry eagle.

"No," he admitted, his voice very small.

"No, you don't?" his father said in exaggerated surprise, "You do not remember the name of the man who was the entire reason why I went to that provincial excuse of a party and listened to self-important clothing merchants blorate for hours? Well," he said, mockingly patting Connor on the shoulder, "I can't blame you, since you disappeared after one dance to play cards in a backroom!"

Connor felt his insides slowly begin to shrivel inside of him as he realized just what his father was saying. Captain Smith had been the man that his father had wanted to talk to. The man that had something that he wanted very badly. And now that Captain Smith was dead, his father would never be able to get it.

"I am sorry," he said, "I did not-"

"You didn't what, Connor? Think?"

"I did not realize that it was the man that you needed to retrieve something from that was the one who was keeping Miss Gillian captive." Connor hesitated, then plunged forward, "Father, I only killed him after he threatened to torture us!"

"And why would he feel the need to do that?" his father sneered, "No, wait, let me guess, it was because you got involved in matters you should not have! For god's sake, Connor, why did you not think this through before jumping into things!"

Connor pressed his lips together to keep them from trembling and took a deep breath through his nose. As he sat in the chair and tried to keep from shaking, Haytham closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Give me your blades, Connor," his father finally said after several seconds of silence, sounding older and more tired than he had ever heard him sound before. "It is clear that you are not yet ready for them."

It felt like the world fell away from under him. Connor stared at his father, trying to make sense of what he had just said. His father didn't say anything else, simply stood where he was, his arms crossed and a disappointed look on his face.

Feeling like he was trying to move while underwater, he looked down at his wrists. Underneath his filthy and bloodstained sleeves, he could feel the heavy weight of leather and steel clinging to his forearms, a mark of his father's regard for him. The blades had helped him greatly tonight, and now he had to hand them back over.

His eyes began to burn as a lump formed in his throat. Had he truly lost his father's trust and regard in a single night? Blinking rapidly, he glanced back up at his father. His face hadn't changed, still set in a disappointed mask as he looked down at him, and Connor swallowed painfully as his chest clenched. He had. He had lost his father's trust.
His fingers trembled as he pushed his sleeves back and began to unbuckle the first of his hidden blades from his forearm. Biting the inside of his cheek, he tried not to make any sound that could be seen as a sob. The leather, still stiff with its newness, squeaked as he fumbled at it, its steel blade still dirty under Captain Smith's blood. His father had been going to teach him how to take the blade apart to properly clean it. They had only covered a little about how to properly care for them, to keep the leather supple and how to strike to minimize chances of the blade shattering on the day of the party.

"Wait!"

Connor's hand stuttered mid-unbuckling and he looked over to the couch where Fillian and Gillian were sitting. Fillian was standing, his fists clenched tightly by his sides and chin thrust out stubbornly.

"Please do not punish him, sir," he said, "it's not his fault that he helped me, I blackmailed him into doing it!"

What?

Connor furrowed his brow at the boy, wondering what he was thinking. He hadn't blackmailed Connor, only threatened to do so. He had stopped once he and Eleanor had pointed out the flaws in his plan.

Looking up at his father, Connor noted that it seemed that he was similarly skeptical of Fillian's claims.

"You blackmailed him," he said, raising an eyebrow, "really. And what, precisely, did you even have that you could blackmail him with?"

"I saw him dumping that guy in the harbour," Fillian said, "and I followed until I saw him getting into your carriage. It was easy to figure out who he was after that."

"You followed him, then?" His father's eyes drifted over to Connor. He cringed.

"I did not see any red," he said weakly as explanation. His father hummed to himself and turned back to Fillian.

"So you saw my son finishing his first assignment. Why would anyone even listen to you if you tried to tell them what you saw? I can't imagine anyone taking notice of some little beggar."

Fillian seemed to waver for a moment, then steeled himself again.

"People are assholes, sir," he said honestly, "an' I figured that they'd listen to anything that fingered an Indian."

His father's lips tightened and Connor winced. He wanted to stop Fillian from talking. His father hated being reminded of how he was seen as lower than the most dissolute rich man's son simply because of his mother's blood.

"Then why did Connor not take care of you? Or even come to me to warn me of the possibility that I might have to bribe a few printers?"

Fillian's eyes flicked over to him, transparent in his concern for him.

"I think that he was just worried what you'd think if he had to do that," he said. "He really loves
and respects you, sir, and doesn't want to disappoint you. That's why he went along with it all. So please, if yer going to punish anyone, punish me for trapping him in such a situation."

It slowly began to occur to Connor that Fillian was not going to mention that he had made similar arguments against Fillian's blackmail attempts. Biting his lip, for a moment he wondered if he should let this go on. It did portray him in a good light, one that was less likely to end with his blades being taken away. But looking up, he could see his father's face was slowly morphing into a thunderous expression as he looked at Fillian.

"So you nearly got my son tortured through blackmailing him to help you on your little rescue mission, did you?"

Closing his eyes, Connor steeled himself.

"He's lying, rake:ni," he said softly. Ignoring how both Fillian and Gillian's heads snapped towards him, he continued speaking. "It is true that Fillian tried to blackmail me, but I knew that no one would listen to him. I went along with it when he revealed that his sister was being held against her will by Captain Smith because I felt sorry for him."

His father's face was still.

"And why did you feel so sorry for him?"

"Because his sister was only in such a situation because she was forced to...sleep with him, so that they would have a place to stay during the winter and have food. When he tried to kick her out, she stole some valuables and tried to ransom them for money. It was a bad situation, rake:ni, and it was so unfair that she had to do so just to survive!" He looked up as his father, desperate for him to understand.

His father sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose again.

"So rather than being blackmailed, you were simply a bleeding heart," he said, "did I understand that correctly?"

Connor nodded.

His father dropped his hands to his sides and held them out as he turned away, as if he was begging some spirit to come and relieve him of the foolishness in the room. Letting them drop to his sides, he placed them on his hips and stared at the empty fireplace.

Outside, Connor could hear the other servants stirring and starting to prepare for the day. The clinking and footsteps echoed through the house, making him very aware of the silence in the room that he was sitting in. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Gillian and Fillian looking at him, probably wondering why he had jumped in and contradicted Fillian's story. But how could he have not? He knew from the look on his father's face that if he had stayed silent, the least that his father would have done would have been to beat Fillian and throw him out onto the street. And the boy, despite the attempted blackmail, didn't deserve that.

"So I have lost my chance to learn where Captain Smith was keeping his Piece of Eden and had it revealed that my son is a fool," his father said, as if he was simply musing aloud.

Connor jerked slightly, feeling as if he had just had a knife sunk into his chest. Biting his lip, he looked back down into his lap, with one hidden blade half-undone and hanging from his forearm.

"Wait, Piece of Eden?"
Gillian's voice broke the silence, sounding just slightly shrill.

"Nothing for you to concern yourself with," his father said darkly, a warning for the girl to stay quiet.

"No, no, it's just that I have heard that term before," she said.

Both Connor and his father whipped their heads around to stare at the red-haired girl.

"What?" his father said, his voice tight, "Where?"

Gillian shrugged.

"The captain liked to babble when he was fucking me," she said bluntly, "and I listened in on a few conversations when I got the feeling that he was about to throw me out. Pieces of Eden, they're shiny and glow, right? Look like they're made of metal?"

His father narrowed his eyes and took several long strides towards her until he was towering above her, his arms folded across his chest.

Gillian, to her credit, looked only a tiny bit nervous.

"I thought that you were simply one of his maids," he said, his eyes flicking up and down her body.

"How old are you?"

Gillian shrugged.

"Twelve," she said.

Connor choked on his own spit. Turning, his eyes widened along with his father's.

Twelve?! She looked as if she could pass for fifteen with her hair up like it was!

Gillian ignored their looks and continued talking.

"I'm gonna guess that I'm right," she said, "anyways, I saw him stroking it one night and figured that it was valuable to him, so the day he kicked me out I took it and hid it someplace only I knew about. Then I started to blackmail him for its location in return for enough money to make it through the winter. He didn't like that, and you know the rest of the story."

"Do you still know where it is?" Connor's father asked.

Gillian nodded. Then her eyes narrowed, and a speculative look crossed her face.

"But," she said, lengthening the word, "that knowledge won't come cheap to you." She leaned forward in her seat and laced her fingers underneath her chin, looking up at Haytham through her eyelashes.

His eyes narrowed.

"What is your price?" he asked, his voice low and even.

"Well," she said, examining the nails on one of her hands, "it takes quite a lot of money to get through New York winters; fuel for fires, shelter, food, clothing, it all adds up rather quickly."

Haytham cocked his head to one side.
"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "That's rather bold of you, is it not? After all, you did nearly get my son tortured while rescuing you; he could have easily died. Why would I then reward you for that with money when I could simply have you...questioned?"

A hint of a smirk hovered around Gillian's lips.

"Are you really sure that that would be a good idea?" she asked, her voice filled with sweetness and light. "Your son did just go through a lot of trouble to free me from my tormenters; it would be a pity if you then went and did exactly what my captors threatened."

Connor straightened in his seat a little as his father's eyes slid towards him.

"But perhaps you are right," Gillian said, her lips twisting into a calculated pout, "demanding money from you after causing you and your son so much trouble is rather cheeky of me, isn't it."

"Quite," his father drawled.

"Then how about, rather than giving my brother and I money to go away, you make me servants in your house?"

Connor's eyebrows shot into his hairline. He had thought of that, but had dismissed it. Looking at his father, his face was as stony as ever, but Gillian did not seem intimidated.

"You would get both the Piece of Eden, and a pair of working hands to scrub your floors and such until you deem our debt to you and your son discharged. My brother and I would get a place to stay and food. Since you have what you wanted, Connor wouldn't need to be punished by having those blades of his taken away." Gillian batted her lashes and smiled. "We all would win."

His father was silent. After a few seconds, Connor spotted Gillian faltering slightly, and Fillian looking concerned.

Finally though, Connor saw the ghost of a smile around his father's mouth.

"You certainly are cheeky," he said, his attention fully on the red-haired girl. "Especially with trying to dictate how I deal with my son."

Connor flinched.

"But your idea has merit, I suppose. At the very least, your little show of confidence is certainly amusing enough. However," he said, holding up a hand, "regardless of whether or not I get the item in question, Connor still broke my trust in him."

"But sir!" Fillian protested, leaping to his feet.

"First lesson in your service to my household," his father said, his voice plunging to freezing depths, "do not interrupt me."

Fillian quailed underneath the force of his glare and quietly sat back down.

"However, I suppose that your defense of him, after knowing him for only a few hours, is somewhat interesting. It has certainly given me a few new ideas as to what his future role in my Order could be." His father cocked his head to one side, his eyes glittering. "But he still needs to know what he did was not acceptable."

"Connor," he said, his smile fading as he turned back to him, "I will continue to have you trained in
the use of the hidden blades. However, outside of training, you will have no access to them. Not until I am satisfied that you have learned your lesson about obedience."

Connor squeezed his eyes shut, relieved. He was being given a chance to redeem himself. He had to swallow a few times before he felt he could speak.

"Thank you, rake:ni," he said, blinking rapidly as water welled up in his eyes, "I swear, this won't happen again."

His father simply grunted.

"See that you don't." he said coolly, and swept out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

As ever, please let me know what you thought of this chapter! All constructive criticism is appreciated!
Alright everyone, sorry for the lack of a Wednesday/Thursday update. Work's been a little rough lately and I've been having trouble keeping up a good writing schedule. No matter what though, I intend to continue the Saturday postings at the very least.

Now, on to the chapter; start of a new arc with Kanen'to:kon as the viewpoint character. As ever, please feel free to give me constructive criticism, especially on his character voice. I'm not completely sure of my grasp on it.

You must save your people, the woman had said and not-said in his head as the world had begun to fade away.

It had started in the longhouse, after Ratonnhake:ton had fallen to the ground, shaking and drooling for what had felt like an eternity until he had finally stilled and stared at the ceiling blankly, his eyes darting around and looking at something only he was able to see. The Clan Mother's cries had echoed in his ears, in everyone's ears as he was taken away by Otetieni and the others, looking small and fragile in their arms. After such a thing, Kanen'to:kon had shaken as well as he had taken the carved ball that his tribe had protected for generations, expecting the same to happen to him.

But it had not. Instead, a beautiful ghostly women, her voice soft and sympathetic as she glowed gold like the sun, had appeared and spoken to him, saying that now was where Kanen'to:kon's ancestors had learned what their duties to their tribe would be. Where he would learn what his duties were.

Now, he was a bear, following a star so bright that it put all of the other stars in the sky to shame as it travelled through the sky and spoke to him in the woman's voice. It was cold in the night sky, despite the firey stars that surrounded them and made a path for him to walk on. Kanen'to:kon could feel how his body was changed; looking down, he saw that his hands had shifted into furry paws, made up of smaller stars and the spaces between them, and he knew like how he knew his own name that he was now in the body of a bear. Beneath his paws, far beneath, were clouds, so white and pure that they almost hurt to look at.

Ahead of him, the steady light of the star-woman floated, perfect and cold.

"What have you done to me?" Kanen'to:kon called out, his voice far shakier than he wanted it to be.

I changed our forms to those that have meaning in your culture, said the woman. It is to ease navigation.

She was moving now, forcing Kanen'to:kon to follow. He felt clumsy, but strong, as if his new body could shake the very earth with its footsteps, and for a moment, he was very glad that they were above the earth and not on it. Then the star began to fall, leaving a trail of light behind it as the clouds below parted to let it through. The starry path that had been laid beneath Kanen'to:kon's feet twisted and unravelled, and he fell as well.
Despite the thickness of the clouds, the woman's voice was as clear as ever.

Your people are at a crossroads, the star-woman said, where they are surrounded by plots beyond their understanding.

Before Kanen'to:kon's eyes, the clouds twisted. The light from the woman illuminated a scene, of five colonist men sitting at a table, their faces twisted with greed and arrogance. There was a sixth, wearing a tricorn hat standing at the head of the table, the hat shadowing his face.

There are men who wish to steal your land for the sanctuary that is hidden upon it. You must stop them, the woman said. Her voice came from all directions, buffeting him as he fell. More shapes, illuminated by her glow, took form, this time showing a glowing door with the men from the previous scene in front of it, holding weapons, the man in the tricorn hat in the middle and clearly leading them towards it.

The sanctuary must not be breached. If it is, the balance of power in the land will be destroyed. Your people will be the first to suffer.

Another scene; their village on fire, his people screaming as the men attacked them, killing everyone with sick looks of satisfaction on their faces as the tricorn-wearing man watched.

Yours is not a special lineage, the woman said. Lights were surrounding them, burning away the clouds around them. But you are connected to the one that is the key to stopping all of this from coming to pass.

The other lights were falling stars, keeping pace with him and the star woman. The twisted and swooped around each other in their falling, and made a picture of a very familiar face.

"Ratonhnhake:ton," Kanen'to:kon breathed, and the lights split off and apart, until they began to form their own pictures.

Ratonhnhake:ton sleeping beside him. Hunting with him. Laughing beside the fire with him. Even, Kanen'to:kon saw as the cold heat of the stars began to burn in his stomach with embarrassment, kissing him. Touching him. Looking at him with love.

You love him, the star-woman noted, her tone uninterested.

"Yes," he admitted.

As things are, you will never be able to be with him again.

The pictures shattered violently, their dust collecting beneath Kanen'to:kon and creating a new picture that made him shout with horror.

Ratonhnhake:ton lay half-naked in the dirt, his beautiful eyes dulled in death. Tears had carved trails along his cheeks and temple, joined with blood that pooled underneath his head from the wide, wet mouth that had been sliced open in his neck. More blood spattered across his chest, his shirt sliced open to reveal more gashes across his chest and one large tear across his belly where wet, glistening ropes of gut poked out and fell on the ground in loops. Around him were the figures from before, their faces cruel and jeering as they looked down on him. The man with the tricorn stood at Ratonhnhake:ton's feet, his face still in shadow and his sword red and dripping with
Ratonhnhake:ton's blood.

Your lover is the key to resolving the situation, the woman said, her voice calm and unaffected by the horrific scene she was showing Kanen'to:kon. But he has already been captured by those who seek to dominate this land. They have seduced him, and turned him against his people.

You must save him, the woman said, a note of urgency finally entering her voice. Kanen'to:kon squeezed his eyes shut uselessly; he could still see the image of the dead Ratonhnhake:ton. If he continues on his path, everything will fall into disarray. He must be separated from those who would open the sanctuary.

His eyes burning, Kanen'to:kon struggled to breathe and clumsily pawed at his face.

"H-how?" he choked out, opening his eyes again to stare pleadingly at the star-woman. "How can I save Ratonhnhake:ton?"

Finally that horrible picture began to dissolve like the others.

You must leave your village, the star-woman said as the dust began to form a different shape, and seek this sign.

Like a teardrop with a curved line underneath it, the sign glowed and pulsed in time with the star-woman. Her voice was intimate, now, like a whisper in Kanen'to:kon's ear.

They will train you to fight those that keep your lover away from his destiny. He will return, and leave the message to he who will save us all.

Kanen'to:kon wrinkled his brow.

"He who will save us all?" he asked, "Who is that?"

But the star-woman's fall was slowing, while his was speeding up. Alarmed, Kanen'to:kon flung out a hand as her glow began to fade.

"Wait!" he cried, "I have so many questions!"

But she was gone. Twisting as the air whistled by his ears, Kanen'to:kon barely had time to close his eyes before he was crashing through the canopy. Branches whipped across his unprotected face and hands. Then he was hanging in the air, and he cracked open an eye just enough to see the pile of branches that he was about to fall in.

He landed with a whumph as the air was knocked out of his lungs. The branches poked into his back as he lay there and tried to suck enough air into his lungs, tears in his eyes. Above him were the criss-crossing branches of the trees that surrounded the village, in full summer bloom.

Ratonhnhake:ton's grinning face, so different from the broken boy that had been shown to him, swam into focus above Kanen'to:kon.

"You did a lot better that time!" he said cheerfully, placing a warm hand on Kanen'to:kon's chest. "You'll be beating me in the races soon!"

Kanen'to:kon smiled sheepishly.

"I don't think that that's going to happen anytime soon," he replied, putting his hand on top of Ratonhnhake:ton's, "but I appreciate the lie."
Ratonhnhake:ton's smile softened into something gentle and fond. He leaned closer to Kanen'to:kon, until his hair made a curtain that blocked the world out and his hot breath gusted against his chin.

"It is not a lie," he said, sliding his hand out from underneath Kanen'to:kon's and moving it to cup his jaw, "it is a truth." His lips were brushing against his now with every word. 
"Have some faith in yourself, like I do," he said, his voice low. Then he was pressing his lips against Kanen'to:kon's, his tongue flicking out to run across his lips and beg entrance into his mouth, and Kanen'to:kon opened his mouth to welcome it as Ratonhnhake:ton pressed his naked body against his -

Kanen'to:kon woke with a start.

Above him, a bird was singing loudly, its song filling the air and drowning out the murmur of the river that Kanen'to:kon had laid down next to for a nap. Lifting his head, he rubbed his eyes and cursed. He had only meant to sleep for an hour more, but the position of the sun told him that he had been lying there for far longer than he had intended.

Shifting slightly, he let out a gasp as a bolt of heat shot up his spine. Looking down, the sight of the tent in his deerskin trousers made him groan. It looked like he would be there for a little longer, now. Sitting up and leaning back against the rocks he had lain down next to, he began to unlace his trousers, determined to get his little problem over with. Stuffing his free hand into his mouth as he freed himself, he settled back and closed his eyes, summoning the image that he had been dreaming of.

After washing his hands and relacing his trousers, Kanen'to:kon swung his bow back over his shoulders and checked his pack. He had packed a fair bit of food before leaving the village, but after several days of travelling, there was very little left. The Clan Mother had told him where to go to find the sign that the spirit had shown him, but with the early autumn rains, Kanen'to:kon had been forced to change his route several times to find places where he could cross rivers safely.

Swinging his pack onto his back as well, Kanen'to:kon wondered if he would have to hunt for his food once he was being trained by the warriors. He hoped not. For all that Ratonhnhake:ton encouraged him, he personally doubted that he would ever that good of a hunter.

Setting off, he quickly fell into the long-limbed lope that he had been taught as a young child, eating up ground. Birds and other animals chattered in the trees and crashed through the underbrush of the forest as he travelled, and Kanen'to:kon found himself thinking as he walked.

The dream of the vision that the spirit had given him bubbled at the back of his mind, and despite himself, he found his mind drawn back to the picture of Ratonhnhake:ton's dead face. Despite the warm sun shooting through the gaps in the branches above, Kanen'to:kon shivered. That vision had been so real. It had felt at the time as if he could reach out and touch Ratonhnhake:ton's face, feel the warmth of the blood on his cheeks.

There would be nothing he regretted more than just letting Ratonhnhake:ton go that morning two weeks ago. Unconsciously, he reached up to touch the scarf that the other boy had given him. If only he had been able to tell him what he had seen, the danger he was in!

But he hadn't; instead, he had cowardly allowed Ratonhnhake:ton to comfort him, and watched has he rode back into the colonist world and the dangers there with only the scarf that he had given him.

A black wave of self-doubt rose up in him. How was he supposed to save Ratonhnhake:ton?
Ratonhnhake:ton had always been the brave one in their friendship, the smart one, the talented hunter and warrior who patiently helped him as he fumbled the footwork and struggled to catch anything for the tribe to eat. He was the clumsy one, the slow one who was afraid of heights and struggled to keep up with the shining star that was his friend.

His steps slowing, Kanen'to:kon bit his lip. Could the spirit have made a mistake? Did she mean to send someone else instead?

The young native was rudely yanked out of his self-doubt at the feeling of a sharp blade pricking at his back.

He stopped in his tracks and stiffened. A soft chuckle floated over his shoulder.

"Well, well," the deep voice of a man murmured in English, "what's a native like you doing on Master Davenport's land, so far from your tribe, hmm?"

Kanen'to:kon swallowed and gripped the straps of his pack tighter. Desperately, he searched for the English words needed to explain, but they scattered as he looked for them like birds on the beach, flying away as he ran after them.

"Ummm," he mumbled, sweat prickling on his forehead. The point against his back pressed harder.

Then a sharp bark of laughter broke the tension.

"Liam," came a woman's voice, filled with amusement, "let the native boy go, you're scaring him!"

The pressure against his back disappeared, and Kanen'to:kon looked up. Standing on a branch above him, there was a woman. She wore strange clothes for a colonist woman, Kanen'to:kon knew from Ratonhnhake:ton's stories. Her dark skin contrasted the white of her hood and trousers and the red of the sash around her waist.

The glint of sunlight off of metal drew Kanen'to:kon's eye. Holding a sword in place at her hip was a leather belt with a polished metal buckle that was shaped strangely -

"Ah!" Kanen'to:kon gasped, his eyes widening. He flung out his arm to point at the symbol that the buckle had been cast in. "That!"

"What, her belt?" the man behind him growled, strolling around until he entered his view, "What about it?"

"I, uh," Kanen'to:kon stuttered and shifted where he stood. Unconsciously, he reached up to tug at a braid as his tongue tripped over the English words. "I was sent to seek it. I have to be trained by the warriors that fight under it to save my people." Anxiously, he bit his lip and looked at the two in front of him, hoping that he had said the words correctly.

They weren't looking at him. They had looked at each other as he had spoken. A silent conversation passed between the two of them as Kanen'to:kon watched, with the man's thick black eyebrows wagging up and down and the woman narrowing and then widening her eyes. Kanen'to:kon gulped. He hoped that the conversation was going in his favour.

Finally, after several minutes of silent looks, they turned back to Kanen'to:kon, looking serious.

"You should come with us," the woman said gently. Kanen'to:kon let out a breath that he didn't know he was holding.
"Thank you," he said clumsily and gratefully, his tongue tripping over the sharp words of English.

"Don't thank her yet, boy," the man growled. His dark eyebrows stood out against his pale skin and eyes as they lowered. "Mentor Davenport will be the one deciding about your story, not her."

Kanen'to:kon gulped at those words, but followed the two, his head whirling.

Mentor Davenport? Who was he? The two in front of him moved confidently through the underbrush, clearly knowing where they were going. It wasn't long before they broke out of the forest and reached a wide road.

As they travelled down the road, they passed by open fields filled with ripened grain and the strange wooden buildings of the colonists. Men and women walked past him, ignoring him and his guides. It was beautiful land, he supposed, but the large knot in his belly kept him from truly appreciating anything he saw.

Too soon, they were standing in front of a door that was on the largest building that Kanen'to:kon had ever seen. It was red and white and made of rough stone. The door in front of him was carved and painted white to match the pillars on either side of him.

The man reached out and twisted the doorknob, walking in without a care in the world and the woman at his heels. Kanen'to:kon hesitated. Was he welcome as well? Or should he wait outside for the man and woman to bring Mentor Davenport to him? There was so much he did not know about colonists. He wished that he had asked Ratonhnhake:ton before he had left.

The woman looked over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow at him. Flushing, he stepped into the house.

Immediately, he was hit with the scent of bread and smoke, two scents that reminded him of home. There was the murmur of voices from a room upstairs, rising and falling in volume and echoing down the tall wooden stairwell, just on the verge of being understandable.

The man closed the door behind them and sighed, gesturing to a room right off of the doorway.

"Right," he said gruffly, "you should go sit down in the parlor while we get the Mentor. He'll decide if you're to be one of us or turned out on your ear."

Kanen'to:kon nodded and tried not to show his curiosity over how he could be 'turned out on his ear'. Shuffling his feet, he hunched as he entered the room gestured to and looked around as the man and woman headed up the stairs.

The room was red. That was the first thing that Kanen'to:kon noticed. The walls were painted, it looked like, with a red paint and white trimming, much like the outside of the house. Set in the wall opposite of him was a fireplace, piled high with logs but unlit. Above that was a large painting; in it were three people, all of them darker-skinned than him. A woman, a child and a man. They were all dressed in the colonist style that Kanen'to:kon had seen while travelling, if somewhat richer than the average farmer. The woman had covered her hair with a cloth, and the man with a white, curled wig that seemed to be the mark of the wealthy among the colonists. Kanen'to:kon remembered Ratonhnhake:ton once talking about paintings like this. They were family portraits, he had called them, and then he had wrinkled his nose. His father had commissioned one, he had explained, and he had had to sit still for hours and not do anything as the man hired had painted. Looking at the little boy in the portrait, Kanen'to:kon wondered if he had hated sitting still as much as Ratonhnhake:ton had for the painting.
A quiet cough pulled Kanen'to:kon out of his studying of the painting. Looking around, Kanen'to:kon spotted the girl sitting in the chair by the window that he had missed when he walked in.

Despite the green dress that she wore and the careful curls of her hair, he was immediately reminded of Ratonnhake:ton. Her skin that reminded him of paper dipped in tea, the brown eyes that seemed to flash gold in the sunlight, even the quiet dignity in the lines of her body; it was so similar to Ratonnhake:ton that his heart squeezed with a sudden burst of homesickness.

The murmuring from upstairs stopped. Above, there was the scraping of wood against wood, and then footsteps thumping down the stairs. Kanen'to:kon turned, just in time to watch as a white-haired and white-skinned woman in a yellow and cream dress sweep into the room, a darker-skinned man following her. Her eyes flicked over him and dismissed him without her even breaking a stride. She crossed the room and stopped in front of the girl in the green dress and placed her hands on her hips.

"Well," she said, her voice filled with satisfaction, "I've managed to convince Mentor Achilles, Aveline; congratulations! Now let's get your belongings settled in."

The darker-skinned man rolled his eyes.

The girl, now named Aveline, rubbed her eyes and nodded, getting up from her seat silently. The motion drew Kanen'to:kon's eyes to the dark circles under them that he hadn't noticed at first glance. He only had a second to look though, as the woman in the yellow dress and Aveline swept out of the room, the woman chattering on about nothing at all in particular.

In the now-silent room, with the dark-skinned man looking at him, Kanen'to:kon shifted from one foot to the other. Against his will, he found his hands drifting up to fiddle with his braid nervously.

"Well," the man said, crossing his arms and taking a step towards him, "Liam and Mary informed me that they found you in the forest surrounding my homestead, saying that you had to seek those who fought under a certain sign."

He paused and looked at Kanen'to:kon. With nothing better to do, the young man nodded jerkily.

"I see," the older man said, drawing closer to Kanen'to:kon. "In that case, young man, would you mind explaining why you wear the sign of our enemies?"

Kanen'to:kon wrinkled his forehead. The sign of their enemies?

Quick as a snake, the man's hand struck out and grabbed Kanen'to:kon's scarf, dragging him close.

"This, boy," he said, his voice as cold as a grave, "the Templar Cross." He pulled and held up one end of the scarf, showing him the scarlet cross embroidered there.

Kanen'to:kon said the first thing that crossed his mind.

"It was a gift."

For a moment, the man's face was still. Then, slowly and incredulously, an eyebrow lifted. Kanen'to:kon flushed.

"I think, perhaps, you have a story to tell here," he said, incredulity still thick in his tone. "How about you sit down?"
"That is quite the story boy, and if I wasn't already aware of those spirits of yours, I certainly wouldn't have believed you. Whatever your spirit said, though, I must warn you. Don't go expecting to be a hero. There's no such thing. Your friend with the unpronounceable name is not going to stay the same person in the time that it will take for you to be trained, and he may not appreciate being saved."

Kanen'to:kon wandered away from the manor house in a daze, Mentor Davenport's words echoing in his ears. The history he had given to him was dizzying, stretching back centuries and speaking of places that Kanen'to:kon had only ever heard of through Ratonhnhake:ton.

But he had done it. He had convinced Mentor Davenport to take him in and teach him his warrior ways. He was one step closer to his goal of saving Ratonhnhake:ton. Shuffling through the dying plants of early autumn, Kanen'to:kon gulped as he reached his goal.

The door of the building that Mentor Davenport had pointed him towards loomed in front of him. Stepping over the threshold would mark the beginning of his training. He would meet his fellow novices, the ones that he would be training alongside while he was here.

He gulped and reached for the handle.

Before he could properly grip the handle though, the door was thrown open and a small figure, a whole head shorter than him, barreled into his chest like it was determined to go through the other side and bounced off. Kanen'to:kon only staggered slightly, but the figure fell flat on its ass with an 'oomph'.

It was a young man, perhaps a year or two younger than Kanen'to:kon in the native boy's reckoning, wearing the plain clothes of a colonist, a large-brimmed hat that seemed to swallow his head, and a massive pair of red scars that stretched across his cheeks in a parody of a grin.

Furiously adjusting the hat, the boy tilted his head back and squinted up at Kanen'to:kon for a moment before his face broke out in a real broad smile.

"Well, hey there, fellow novice!" the boy said, jumping to his feet and grabbing Kanen'to:kon's hand, energetically moving it up and down. "My name's Joe, just Joe, what's your name?"

Kanen'to:kon flinched twice at the greeting; the first time for the boy's scars and the second for being touched so suddenly. Luckily, before he had to forcibly tear his hands from the other boy's, the boy let go and placed his hands on his hips, beaming. Kanen'to:kon suddenly felt very awkward under his gaze and had to force himself not to fiddle with his hair.

"Um, my name is Kanen'to:kon." he said shyly.

Joe's smile grew impossibly bigger.

"Well come on in, Ganen-doe-go!" he said, turning on his heel, "I'll introduce you to everyone!" Without bothering to stop and see if Kanen'to:kon was following, Joe turned on his heel and began to speedily trot off, continuing to chatter. Kanen'to:kon was forced to widen his stride to catch up as he ducked into the cool little house.

The walls were plain and white in the way that Kanen'to:kon was beginning to recognize as the colonist default, with rooms off of the main hallway that stretched through the entire house. Right
inside by the door was a staircase, just like in the main manor except for the chattering scarred boy darting up it. Kanen'to:kon followed him at a slower pace, trying to keep calm as the sound of doors opening and feet stomping around filled the air. Would the others accept him? Mentor Davenport had warned him that he was the first Native to join their order. Quietly taking a deep breath and let it out as he reached the top landing.

"Hey, hey, hey guys!" Joe chanted, bouncing slightly in one place as doors opened and people shuffled out, "We got another person, that's two in one day! James, Will, Alice, Ed, come out and say hi!"

"Yay, congratulations Joe, you can count," groused the boy that had been called Will. He scratched his whispy-furred jaw and yawned. "Now did I really need to be woken up for that?"

A frown flashed across Joe's face like lightning during the summer storm, but Kanen'to:kon was quickly distracted by looking around at the other novices in the building as the younger boy launched into a tirade against the other boy. He was struck by the range of ages present. Only the people that Joe had introduced to him looked to be anywhere near his age, with the rest of them looking far older; one looked old enough to be Kanen'to:kon's father, even! They were dressed differently than the others, wearing whites coats and red sashes that reminded him of the uniforms that the colonist warriors wore while walking around. Their faces swam and blurred together as Joe went back to chattering at him, throwing names at him as rapidly as a woodpecker knocked on a tree trunk.

Out of the sea of faces, one in particular caught his eye. Looking to be closer to the ages of the other novices, her face was familiar, with darker skin than the others. Her hair pulled back from her face and twisted into multiple braids, streaked through with red ribbons and lying flat against her head. Leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and a blank look on her face, it took a moment for Kanen'to:kon to recognize her. Then she shifted, and something about the movement tickled a memory.

Kanen'to:kon's eyes widened. It was the girl from before! She had been waiting in the room with him, before that woman had ushered her out and he had been interrogated by Mentor Davenport. Kanen'to:kon wondered at her silence amongst the other chattering people, who had by now either gone back to their rooms or been drawn into the loud argument between the grouchy novice and Joe. Biting the inside of his cheek and casting his gaze around the remaining colonists, he decided that out of all the people that were here, he would rather start his introductions with a quiet person. With that in mind, he began to pad towards the girl when the sound of the door downstairs crashing open cut through the chatter. Instantly, everyone was silenced.

"Alright, you little bastards," came the roar from downstairs, "everyone out for evening training!"

The man who had crashed into what Kanen'to:kon had now been informed with a great amount of profanity was the gatehouse was named Diederick Heiman. He was, according to Joe (who had attached himself like a limpet to Kanen'to:kon at the first chance, apparently deciding that since they were so close in age to each other they were destined to be best friends), a master Assassin who had several years before been unfortunate enough to be crippled by the Templars in an attack on one of the Assassin smuggling operations.

Also according to Joe, as a reward for his years of faithful service, rather than abandoning Heiman to his fate Mentor Davenport made a point of having him brought back to the homestead to instead pass on his knowledge and experience to the recruits that for various reasons couldn't be trained in the main colonist cities and towns.
Kanen'to:kon was not so sure that it was a reward for Heiman. Wheezing and gasping as they ran through the forest as a 'test of endurance', he was rather more sure that it was a punishment for some previous batch of recruits.

"COME ON YOU LAZY FUCKS, IF YOU DON'T FINISH THEN YOU DON'T GET DINNER!"

Kanen'to:kon stumbled and nearly fell down, only just catching him in time to keep from falling. Wiping sweat from his eyes, he muttered something rude. He had known that training as a warrior would be hard, but a three-hour run before dinner was too much!

At least he wasn't alone in his wheezing and gasping. Everyone, it seemed, ended up in a similar situation during these endurance runs if the glances between the recruits meant what he thought they did. Glancing up ahead of himself, he spotted the girl from before (Aveline was she called?) struggling as well. As he watched, he saw her swatting at bugs attracted to the sweat dripping down her face. The others were making similar motions, making Kanen'to:kon glad that he had applied the bug repellant that the Clan Mother had given to him before leaving that morning. It was doing its job perfectly, keeping the biting flies away even as he sweated.

A pity it didn't do anything for screaming muscles, though. As they crested the final hill in the loop, he felt like he could have wept at the sight of the manor. His arms and legs were trembling from the workout that he had given them, and this was apparently only part of the daily routine that recruits were put through!

If he did not die from the training, Kanen'to:kon did not doubt that he would be able to save Ratonhnhake:ton from anything.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity and one last agonizing climb up a hill to the manor, Diederick finally allowed them to stop. To his credit, he had stayed at the front of the group throughout the entire run, similarly sweating and soaking his clothes through.

As the last few stragglers, a boy with spectacles that were nearly falling off of his nose and a skinny boy who looked like a bundle of sticks that had been tied together, stumbled in front of him, he snorted and placed his hands on his hips.

"Right, my little novices, you got ten minutes to clean up, then dinner's served. If you don't show up, you don't get dinner. If you're not eating dinner, then you're running more laps, got it?"

Kanen'to:kon glanced around; no one looked very surprised, so he supposed that the man's words were a regular threat. Turning his head back to look at the brown-haired man, he saw him give the group one last once over before clapping his hands together.

"Dismissed!" he barked.

His legs shaking, Kanen'to:kon staggered off back to the guest house in a daze along with all of the other novices. He was barely able to wipe himself down with clean water, his arms trembling from even that much effort, and he wondered if he would be able to properly feed himself.

By the time he staggered down the stairs to the main eating room, he felt ready to collapse. The room was large, looking almost like a miniature longhouse in its long, rectangular shape. In the middle of it was three long tables pushed together into one longer table, surrounded by chairs. Most of the chairs were already occupied, the novices either slouching and looking half asleep or shovelling as much food onto their plates as possible.
Kanen'to:kon paused in the doorway, taking in the dizzying smells and noise. When Joe had dragged him into the guest house, he hadn't really introduced him to anyone, being quickly sidetracked by his argument with the whispy-jawed boy. The run hadn't allowed him to introduce himself to anyone else afterwards, either. He had been too busy simply trying to breathe and not collapse in exhaustion. So where was he going to sit?

Someone came up behind him and paused as well. Looking over his shoulder with his lower lips caught between his teeth, he saw that it was the girl, Aveline. He was heartened slightly to see that she looked just as nervous as he did. It made sense, he supposed; she too had arrived just that day.

Looking back at the tables, he scanned for empty chairs, only to have his attention caught by rapid movement. Joe was sitting with an empty chair beside him, waving enthusiastically and grinning with a mouthful of food. Kanen'to:kon sighed with relief, the girl completely slipping out of his mind, and went to sit down beside him. For all that the other boy had latched onto him quickly, Kanen'to:kon was glad that he had someone to talk to.

"So, how'd you like Mister Heiman?" Joe asked after gulping down his mouthful, "Kind of rough, isn't he?"

Kanen'to:kon thought of the pain in his legs as he had walked down the stairs after washing up. "Yes," he said, nodding seriously and beginning to pile food on his plate. He didn't really recognize most of it, but his stomach was clenching from hunger enough to not care. Picking up a piece of meat with his hand, he stuffed it into his mouth and began to chew. The meat tasted a bit like squirrel.

Joe laughed and patted him on the arm. He tensed at the touch and reminded himself of Ratonhnhake:ton's stories of colonists. Touching was not seen as rude by them, no matter how little they know you. The instinctive feeling of revulsion would take time to get over though, and mentally he resigned himself to a great deal of discomfort for the next little while.

Luckily, Joe didn't seem to notice his distaste. Instead, he leaned behind Kanen'to:kon to get the attention of the white-clad man on Kanen'to:kon's other side.

"Hey, Donald," he said, "have I introduced you to Ganen-doe-go? He's new and stuff."

The red-haired and red-bearded man barely glanced up from his food. "No," he said. The way he shaped his words was strange, like he was pronouncing it in the back of his mouth and his cheeks.

"Well, this is him!" Joe said, not missing a beat. "He's a native and stuff; I saw Mentor Davenport talking to him in the manor before."

That seemed to get Donald's attention. He finally looked up from his plate, still chewing a mouthful of food, and raised an eyebrow.

"Really?" he said thickly, swallowing a bit of food. "Hey, kid," he said, nudging him in the ribs with an elbow, "what was the Mentor talking with you about?"

Kanen'to:kon paused mid-chew. Was he allowed to tell others of his mission to save Ratonhnhake:ton? His gut clenched again, but not from hunger this time. Thinking furiously, he realized that talking about the spirit woman would most likely end up revealing more about his tribe than he wanted to. Joe and Donald were looking at him though, and Kanen'to:kon realized that he had been silent for too long.
He swallowed and licked his lips, trying to give himself more time.

"Um, he was telling me about the Templars and Assassins. I did not know the names, only the
symbols."

Would that be enough. He flicked his gaze between his two neighbours and hunched in his seat. Joe looked to still be curious, and Donald had an odd look on his face. It wasn't until his lips peeled
back from his teeth that Kanen'to:kon realized it was the start of a smile.

Reaching out, Donald briefly clapped him on the back. "Finally got a name to put to the bastards,
eh?" he said warmly. "That has to be a relief."

Looking towards Joe, Kanen'to:kon saw that he, too, was smiling again.

"I found that it was relief to put a name to them," he said sagely, nodding his head. "After they
ripped my face open, I was just spinning in circles until the Assassin's came and gave me a name to
put to their faces."

Kanen'to:kon squirmed internally. It was clear that they believed that he had sought the Assassin's
out for revenge. He hoped that they would not expect an explanation from him as to what the
Templars had done to him. There was definitely no way he could explain that he was trying to
prevent an event from happening, rather than avenging one that had already happened without
mentioning the spirit woman.

So when Joe paused and looked at him expectantly, clearly expecting just that, Kanen'to:kon
pretended not to see and shoveled more food into his mouth. After a few uncomfortable moments,
Joe's face fell and he turned back to his food as well. Internally, Kanen'to:kon made a note to come
up with some sort of explanation to tell him later. Joe had been kind to him, after all, and he didn't
want to make him feel bad.

They were curled up in front of a fire, just the two of them. Kanen'to:kon gloried in the feeling of
the skin touching, Ratonhnhake:ton nuzzling at his chin and leaving soft, open-mouthed kisses
along his jawline. Tiring of the teasing, Kanen'to:kon ducked his head down and caught
Ratonhnhake:ton's lips with his. He could feel Ratonhnhake:ton smile against his lips and press
closer to him, dragging a hand down his chest -

Kanen'to:kon woke with a start and a damp set of trousers sticking to his legs. Immediately he
cringed.

Really, was all that he could think about Ratonhnhake:ton centered around sex? Yes, they had
certainly been in love and experimented together, but Kanen'to:kon had thought that he cared for
his friend for more reasons than that.

Sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of bed, he paused momentarily to take a look around
the room. Joe had shown him after dinner, still babbling away like a brook about himself, how his
training was going, and other such things. Kanen'to:kon felt even more guilty for not listening to
him, but after the run and a large dinner, all he had had the energy for was to stare in horror at the
two long staircase that he would have to climb every day to get to rooms set aside for novices.

He breathed a sigh of relief when none of the others stirred. Even back at the village, he had never
enjoyed having to walk past the others to clean himself up after such dreams; no matter what, there
was always someone still awake.

Carefully getting to his feet, he tiptoed past the others in their beds, struggling to stay silent and
prevent the cold, sticky front of his trousers from touching him. The house was silent except for
the occasional creak that came from him stepping on the wrong floorboard and the sounds of the
other novices breathing.

Along with showing him where he would sleep, Joe had also shown Kan'en:to:kon the rest of the
guest house. The uppermost floor where Kan'en:to:kon and the other male novices were forced to
stay in was right at the top of the house, with the ceiling being slanted so that they could not sit up
without hitting their heads and its boards. Its only furniture was several beds pushed to the opposite
ends of the rooms with trunks at the feet of them, leaving only a narrow path between them to the
stairs that lead to the lower levels. Underneath it were several rooms apparently set aside for
visiting assassins of a higher rank; Donald, the man that Kan'en:to:kon had sat beside for dinner had
been one, and accepted Joe barging in to show Kan'en:to:kon what one of the rooms looked like
with surprisingly good humour. The few female novices also shared a room down there, since it
would not have been appropriate, in the eyes of the colonists, for the boys and girls to share a
room.

The first floor had no bedrooms at all, instead being divided into a kitchen, a dining room large
enough to seat them all and a room filled with tables and chairs that Joe confided was for 'lessons'.
Kan'en:to:kon had to assume that it was for the non-physical lessons needed to become an assassin,
since all of that furniture could only be a tripping hazard for physical training.

He was fairly sure that he remembered a barrel of rainwater by the back entrance to the house. It
wouldn't be the most pleasant thing that he had ever done, washing himself with cold water from a
barrel in early autumn, but it also wouldn't be the most unpleasant.

Unfortunately, going out the back door meant going by the school room, where Kan'en:to:kon was
surprised to find that he was not the only person up so late, or early. Sitting in one of the chairs by
a table was a still figure with long hair and dark skin, just barely illuminated by the dim moonlight
coming through the window.

Ducking back from the doorway, Kan'en:to:kon swallowed a rude word. Damn, damn, damn! Being
catcht with dirtied trousers was the last thing that he wanted to happen! The idea of the sort of
humiliation in being found to have done that to his trousers in his sleep made his skin crawl, and
not in the good way.

Peeking around the edge of the doorway, he squinted and tried to figure out if he had been noticed.
On closer inspection, the figure was female, with what looked to be a cup of some sort of cold
drink in front of her. Kan'en:to:kon could tell that it was a woman by the way the white shirt that
the figure was wearing fell on their body, suggesting curves that men just did not have, and how it
was hunched in on itself.

Kan'en:to:kon thought furiously. How many of the novices that Joe had introduced him to were
female, again? Kan'en:to:kon was pretty sure there weren't that many, and none of them older
female Assassins had skin quite so dark enough to partially blend in to a dark room.

After a few moments of his brain frantically churning, a name was spat out.

Aveline.

That was the girl's name.

Now named and with his eyes more adjusted to the darkness, Kan'en:to:kon felt slightly more
comfortable with looking closer at her. She was a few years older than him, he remembered,
something like two or three, with her dark, tightly curled hair pulled back from her face in thick
braids. Those same braids seemed to still be in, if slightly messier from seemingly being slept on.

Then a glimmer caught his eye. Looking closer, he saw a droplet of water roll down her cheek, catching what little light came through the windows and sparkling. And it was not the only one. Tears were tracking down Aveline's face in a steady march, as white as an ermine's pelt underneath the moonlight.

As he watched, she reached up and dabbed at the tears with the cuff of her shirt, carefully wiping them away without a sound and an annoyed look on her face. Kanen'to:kon leaned back slightly on his heels and furrowed his brow.

She was weeping, and yet she did not look sad or sob. She looked annoyed, as if the tears had appeared simply to spite her. How could that be? The sheer number of them made Kanen'to:kon discard the idea that they were the result of allergies. So what was causing them?

As he leaned back, the wet cloth that he had originally come down to clean up sent a shock of cold up his spine, reminding him of why he was even witnessing this event. Biting his lower lip, he peeked back into the room. Aveline did not seem to be in any hurry to move, and was wiping up a few more tears that had fallen.

There was nothing to it. He would have to go around the long way.

By the time he made it back to bed, he was shivering and Aveline was long gone. The nip in the air promised a hard winter to come, and had happily begun to sink its teeth into him as he had scrubbed his deerskin trousers as best he could with just his hands.

What he had seen, though, stayed in the back of his mind.
"It's a hook."

Joe nodded enthusiastically, bouncing from one foot to the other to keep warm as the sun continued to slowly rise. He, Kanen'to:kon and the rest of the novices were outside at this early hour to wait for Heiman, who apparently was not just in charge of endurance training but actually the main teacher for them, to show up from his own room in the manor. So far, Kanen'to:kon was not impressed. First the man had rolled them out of their beds by yelling at the top of his lungs, and then as soon as they had all stumbled out of the building, he had told them wait while he went and got something.

Kanen'to:kon just knew that the feathers in his hair were crooked.

"I know, right?" Joe said, grinning under his scars. "It's so awesome; like, I can use it to fight and stuff, but I can also use it to climb stuff and increase my reach!"

"And you need all the help you can get," muttered Will, his eyes still half-shut.

Joe ignored the snipe and shoved his hook under Kanen'to:kon's face, making him jerk back to avoid being bashed in the eye with the pointy end. Reaching up, he gently pushed the hook back down.

"It is very nice," he agreed, "but how about I look at it later?" Glancing across the expansive field that they were waiting in, he was thankful to spot their teacher emerge from the forest and start marching towards them, his arms filled with something.

"Right," the man barked as he drew closer, "you lot get yourself into pairs, we're practicing knots!"

A murmur ran through the group, and Kanen'to:kon gulped. Part of him was relieved that this was the lesson for the morning; he knew his knots quite well from practicing hunting and fishing in the village. The cold, sickly voice of his insecurities was less sure, wondering if colonist knots were the same as his people's knots. The next words out of the teacher's mouth only increased his insecurity's ammunition.

"Don't look so calm, you little bastards, this isn't knotting class with Faulkner! You aren't going to be tying the knots, you'll be trying to escape!" Dropping most of the large pile of rope in his arms on the ground, he ignored the dust that rose from the ground in favour of looking them all over. Kanen'to:kon squirmed as his gaze settled on him and tried to keep from looking behind him.

"In your pairs, you will take turns tying each other up and then escaping. Those of you who are unfamiliar with the most common knots used to tie people up will be with me." His eyes still glued on Kanen'to:kon, Heiman pointed down at the ground in front of him. "That means you, new kids."

In front of the man, Kanen'to:kon bit his lip and shuffled forward, his ears burning. Joe patted his arm sympathetically before bouncing off towards Will and the other novices, who were already scuffling over the pile of ropes that had been thrown on the ground.

In front of the man, Kanen'to:kon kept his eyes glued to his moccasin-clad feet. He was horribly aware of how dishevelled he was; his hair was only loosely braided and was missing its usual
beads. The feathers that he had managed to put in were definitely crooked, shifting with his every move and feeling like they were on the verge of falling out.

The soft sound of footsteps beside him made him glance over. It was the girl, Aveline. Kanen'to:kon scuffed his toe in the dirt in front of him and tried not to think of what he had seen of her last night.

In front of the two of them, Heiman crossed his arms in front of his chest, still holding a length of rope.

"So," he said, "I don't suppose either of you know much about knots, eh?"

Aveline shook her head as Kanen'to:kon bit his lip. "I, er," he mumbled, unable to look the older colonist in the eye, "I know a few knots, from hunting with my tribe. For snares and such."

Heiman grunted. "Right," he said, "the Mentor told me we had a native show up yesterday." Crouching down, he picked up a length of rope himself and held out. "So anyways, pay attention; I don't want to have to keep repeating myself."

The sun had fully risen by the time Heiman was satisfied with Kanen'to:kon and Aveline's knots. Only then were they allowed to start practicing the same skills as the others had been. Struggling with the ropes, Kanen'to:kon was just glad that everyone else seemed to be having similar difficulties. Panting and with his wrists chafed raw, he was still able to let out a snort of amusement as he watched Joe fall over, clearly having forgotten about the ropes around his ankles in his triumph of freeing his wrists.

"You probably shouldn't be laughing," said a soft, French-accented voice.

Kanen'to:kon stiffened and looked around for a wild few seconds before focusing on the girl sitting across from him, her knees drawn up under her chin. Her lips, with the upper one marked with a pale scar, were quirked slightly into a smile.

Her smile widened at his look and she jerked her chin at the ropes still tied tightly around his own wrists. "After all," she said softly, "you are not doing much better."

Kanen'to:kon was so surprised by her talking that he forgot to continue struggling.

"You can talk?!" he burst out, his eyes widening.

The girl quirked an eyebrow at him. "Of course I can," she said, sounding honestly confused. "When did I ever give the impression that I couldn't?"

Kanen'to:kon felt his cheeks heat up. "I, well," he stammered, "I just never saw you do so." He winced as soon as the words slipped out of his mouth. The look on the girl's face seemed to agree; she was looking at him skeptically.

"Both you and I have only been here for a day," she said, "and we did not exactly have a chance to share stories with each other."

A shadow loomed over the both of them, cutting her off from saying anymore.

"Hey, novices," Heiman said, his brow furrowed, "Did I give you permission to take a break? No?" His face darkened. "Then get back to work."

Kanen'to:kon shrank back from his tone and turned his attention back to struggling with the ropes.
around his wrists. Or rather, around the widest part of his hand. Aveline, in turn, went back to watching him do so intently, looking a little pale. After a few more seconds of looming, Heiman grunted and turned away again, loping towards Joe and Will, who were still lying on the ground and laughing, respectively.

It took only a few more minutes to finish wriggling out of the ropes. Kanen'to:kon was pulling his hand so hard by the end that he nearly hit himself in the eye when it suddenly came free. Rubbing his cheekbone, he heard a giggle.

It was Aveline. Her hand was covering her mouth, but her eyes did not lie and they were sparkling with humour. For a moment, all that he could think was that she was very pretty when smiled.

Shyly, he smiled back and lifted the now-loose ropes. He had never been very good at speaking to girls, but what had just happened was pretty funny.

"It is your turn now," he said.

Something flashed through her eyes, utterly wiping the amusement away and making Kanen'to:kon blink in confusion at the sudden change in mood. As she lowered her hand, her lips were revealed to be pressed into a thin, bloodless line.

"Right," she said, the faintest of trembles in her voice, "let us get this over with then."

She held her hands out perpendicular with each other and with the air of a dead man walking around her. Biting the inside of his cheek, Kanen'to:kon tried to wind the ropes around her wrists as gently as he could and ignore the heaviness in the air.

Around them, he could hear the bugs droning. The air was still and thick, unusually warm as the day was. The sun that had before seemed so welcoming now became merciless. There was a fine tremor in Aveline's hands as he started to tie the knot, so fine that if Kanen'to:kon had not been looking so closely he would not have noticed it.

Then there was a small, soft gasp, and Aveline stood up, roughly yanking the ropes off of her wrists. Kanen'to:kon watched, shocked at the abruptness.

"I am sorry," Aveline said, her tone short and clipped and barely hiding the tremor in her voice, "but I cannot."

Kanen'to:kon was horribly aware that everyone was staring. His face hot, he stumbled to his feet.

"Wait," he cried as she turned on her heel and began to flee, "I-"

A hand clamped down on his shoulder, stopping him from going after her. Looking up, her realized that it was Heiman, watching her go with an inscrutable look on his face.

"Let her go," he said, his voice far softer than Kanen'to:kon had ever heard it previously. "This isn't something to be solved quickly. I'll be your partner now." Squeezing his shoulder, he turned and dragged Kanen'to:kon along with him, keeping him from watching her rapidly-disappearing figure.

"What the hell are you looking at?" he barked at the others, who were frozen similarly to Kanen'to:kon. "If you were actually captured, you'd be dead by now!"

That was not the last time that Aveline walked away from a lesson.
During their lessons in the classroom inside of the guest house, they had been talking about how to properly keep records of business transactions when she had suddenly gotten up and left the room. The same thing happened when they began to talk about seduction missions and how prostitutes were used by the Assassins historically, and also when learning about how to decant poisons in the shack on the very edge of the Homestead.

"It's damn strange," Will grumbled through a mouthful of potatoes. "How come our glorious teacher don't get on her case when he rips us new ones for coughing during an explanation?"

Mutterings of agreement met the pronouncement as they continued to eat their dinner. Kanen'to:kon picked at the limp, boiled vegetables on his own plate, his appetite warring with his tiredness and confusion as to what 'new ones' were. After leaving the poison shack that afternoon, Aveline had completely disappeared, not even reappearing for dinner, and Kanen'to:kon felt a small bit of worry despite not knowing the girl. After all, she had left the first time when he had tried to tie her up.

Joe leaned forward, like he had some great conspiracy to share with the rest of them.

"I heard that she came up here with the head of the Boston cell," he said, grinning. He licked the corners of his lips in what Kanen'to:kon was beginning to suspect was a nervous habit before continuing. "Apparently she's from the French colonies."

"Then why was the Boston cell leader introducing her to the Mentor?" grumped Will, stabbing moodily at his meat. "It doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't Mrs. Scott have a big shipping business along the coast?" piped up Ed; the blond boy's plate was already clean, and he was absent-mindedly gnawing on the end of a bone as he spoke. "Maybe she was down there for some reason and saw that she was all talented and stuff and brought her back up."

"Don't be stupid, Ed," said James, pushing his battered spectacles up his nose, "have you seen her do anything amazing here? Besides, if she really was talented then the French colonies mentor would have already poached her."

Ed scowled, and Kanen'to:kon tried to become one with his chair. Unaccountably, his mind drifted back to several nights previous. While he hadn't had anymore nightmares due to collapsing into his bed after training, the sight of Aveline that night stuck in his mind, right alongside the starwoman's vision. It had just been so strange. While there had been tears trickling down her face, he remembered that she hadn't looked particularly sad. If anything, she had just looked irritated, as if the tears were simply an insult to her. Part of him wondered if he should tell this to the others. The others, however, were paying no attention to him.

"Shut up, you tosser," Ed snapped at James, "I don't see you suggesting anything!"

"That's because I don't just start tossing things out and seeing what sticks to be a good use of my time!"

"Ed's right, though," Joe chimed in, leaning over into Kanen'to:kon's personal space to better be heard, "you haven't suggested any other reasons for her actions."

James flushed and pushed up his glasses again, setting his fork down. Kanen'to:kon could see Will rolling his eyes.

"W-well," he stuttered, his cheeks apple-red, "even if she's from the French colonies -"
"She is, she's got the accent and everything," Alice broke in. She tossed her red hair over her shoulder and sniffed. "Not that it's easy to hear. I swear, she's only said five words to me this week, even with me being all welcoming to her and everything."

Kanen'to:kon squirmed in his seat. "Maybe she is not good at English," he offered quietly, "and does not want to be embarrassed."

The others ignored him.

"-Even if she is from the French colonies," James continued, a little more forcefully, "she could be up here because something happened down there and she's wanted for some crime. I think that's happened a few times with other novices. There's too much of a chance that they'll be recognized and bring down attention onto the Brotherhood if they stay near their homes for training."

Joe wrinkled his nose. "Her?" he said dubiously, "A criminal?" He shook his head. "I can't see it. She's too hoity-toity; I mean, did you see that dress she walked in wearing? That was one expensive-looking piece of clothing, if she was on the run, she'd be looking a lot more ragged, not like she came from some governor's ball."

Will barked out a laugh, spewing potatoes across the table.

"Really?" he taunted Joe, "You're saying that rich people can't commit crimes? I would have thought with your little 'birthmarks' around your mouth you would know better -"

The rest of his sentence was cut off as Joe launched himself across the table at him, kicking Kanen'to:kon's plate into his lap. Kanen'to:kon sighed as Joe began to flail furiously at Will, screaming at the top of his lungs. He had only been there for a week and already he was far too used to such things. Disconsolately, he picked a piece of wilted spinach off of his lap and nibbled at it as some of the older assassins and novices came to separate the two of them.

Dinner was declared to be over fairly quickly after Joe and Will were separated. By that point Will had had a bloody nose and swelling eye, and had been cackling up a storm as two of the visiting assassins held his arms. A private, almost ready for field work, had held Joe under his arm like a bag as he spat and struggled, clawing the air and screaming some very vile words, if the looks on the faces of the others who had not been paying attention to their conversation were to be judged. In any case, the two of them were left holding the bag, so to speak. Heiman had been called from wherever he went during their mealtimes and had decided that their punishment would be to scrub down the room and do the dishes with only each other before they would be allowed to go to bed. It took well over two hours to do so, and Kanen'to:kon was quietly dozing in his bed, almost about to go to sleep when he heard their loud, clomping steps echoing up the stairs.

Groaning, he rolled over and rubbed his eyes as the door was flung open to bang against the wall. Immediately, there was a loud hiss of air as everyone shushed them.

"Fer fuck's sake," grumbled James, "what the hell is wrong with you two?"

Will scoffed and stomped across the room to flop into his bed with a loud huff. Kanen'to:kon let the hand that had been rubbing his eyes fall back onto his pillow and stared up at the ceiling. He wondered what it was that the two of them had still been arguing about as they came up the stairs.

The door clicked shut.

"Guess what?" said Joe, sounding annoyingly perky, "Aveline is back! She came in with the
teacher while we was washing the dishes, and hoo boy, something was up."

That woke Kanen'to:kon up. He was just as curious as everyone else was about the dark-skinned girl.

Groaning, he sat up and slouched forward, and was quickly joined by the others also sitting up. Will stubbornly didn't move however, instead staying facedown in his bed in a sulky silence. Joe was grinning at them, holding a candle and shifting from one foot the other. In the bed opposite of Kanen'to:kon's, James snatched up his spectacles from the table beside it and clumsily put them onto his face.

"Wait wait wait," he said hastily, "let's get Alice first, she'll want to hear this too!"

Joe bounced on his feet impatiently. "Fine, fine," he agreed, "but go get her quick!"

James scrambled out of his bed and darted out of the room, shouldering Joe out of the way. After he was gone, Joe put the candle down on the table between Kanen'to:kon's be and his and sat down cross-legged on top of the covers.

"So," he said, keeping his voice down, "there I was, just washing the dishes while Will was scrubbing the floor -"

"Really?" said Alice as she swept in, wearing a loose robe over her nightgown, "you got a lot of guts starting without me, Joe."

Joe shrugged unashamedly and leaned back on his hands. "Whatever," he said with an ease that made Kanen'to:kon envious, "I didn't get very far."

"That's not the point," Alice said testily as she sat down beside James in his narrow bed. Reaching down, she pulled the covers up until they were around her and James' waists.

"Just tell the story," said Ed, sounding just as annoyed as Alice. "The sooner you're done jawing, the sooner we can go to bed." Kanen'to:kon couldn't help but silently agree with the older boy. He could feel his tiredness in the corners of his eyes, promising exhaustion in the days to come.

"Right, right," said Joe, leaning back forward. "Anyways, like I was saying, we was just finishing up when finally, the princess appears with the teacher in tow. Now, the first thing that hit me was that she looked awful. Seriously awful, like she hadn't slept for a week and had been dragged backwards through a hedge. And our teacher's actin' all weird too, fussing over her and not yelling at her like he does with us for disappearing during lessons."

"Lucky bitch," came the muffled voice of Will, still face-down on the covers of his bed.

"Maybe, maybe," said Joe, "but remember, he may have been being gentle with her and all but he was still chiding her, just not as loudly as he does with us. And then he trails off as he notices that I'm in the room." Joe grinned. "Now," he said, "does that not sound just a little odd to you guys? Being all nice and then stopping when someone else is there?"

"So, like, you think that she's sleeping with him or something?" asked Ed, sounding dubious.

Kanen'to:kon shuddered at the thought. Regardless of the man's health, Heiman was not in his prime anymore, and it showed in his constantly flushed face and balding scalp.

Joe made a face that echoed Kanen'to:kon's thoughts. "Ugh, no," he said, sounding disgusted, "like anyone would want to sleep with him. No, I'm just telling you guys what I saw. And let me tell you, I'm just burning up with curiosity as to why Miss Aveline is getting all this special treatment."
"Don't tell me that you're trying to rope us into some weird investigation," said James. Kanen'to:kon saw him slip his hand into Alice's and squeeze. "Because I am not getting stable duties for a month because of your shenanigans again."

Kanen'to:kon raised an eyebrow. There was a story there.

Joe was shaking his head as Kanen'to:kon looked back over.

"No, no," he said, holding up his hands. "Well, yes." He spread out his hands beseechingly to the room. "Come on," he said, sounding just a bit desperate, "Aren't you guys curious at all? A mysterious girl shows up with a cell leader to advocate for her, is given special treatment by the teachers, and you aren't the least bit curious as to why?"

"Of course we're curious," said Will. Looking over, Kanen'to:kon saw that he had finally lifted his head so that it was no longer buried in his sheets. "We've just all been burned by your little spying expeditions before."

Joe pouted. "Ganen hasn't," he said, and for a moment, in his sleep-addled mind, Kanen'to:kon was confused as to who Ganen was. Then he noticed that Joe was pointing at him. It seemed like the rest of the room had forgotten about him too, as they looked equally surprised when they were looking at him in the dim light of the candle.

Ed was the first to break the silence that had settled around the room. "Just because the Indian hasn't been burned by your schemes doesn't mean anything," he said, "he's new too, in case you've forgotten." Kanen'to:kon frowned a little at the epithet, but kept quiet. He didn't want to start an argument with the people that he shared a house with.

Joe pressed his palms together in front of his face with a pleading expression. "Pleeeeeease," he begged, "nothing this interesting has happened for ages!"

"Christ, whatever," growled Will, cutting off Ed before he could do more than frown and open his mouth. "Fine, we'll all help your little quest. We'll listen for information from the other assassins and teachers, follow her when she disappears next and then compare notes at night." He glared around the room, his forehead wrinkling. "Now how about we all shut the hell up and go to sleep before we get caught, huh?"

Kanen'to:kon, for one, was happy to follow that command. Lying back down, he ignored the mutters as Alice left the room, taking Joe's candle with her and the other boys lay back down. His eyes were burning, and he closed them with relief and slipped in the deep darkness of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back to Wednesday updates!

Hey guys, new contest for readers! Whoever can tell me which canon character Joe is gets a no-prize and congratulations from the author!
By the next morning, Kanen'to:kon had completely forgotten about the deal Joe had made with them all. His attention, rather, was busy being taken up with the news that the teacher had decided that he knew that basics of how to use a sword well enough to actually take part in the practice spars in the outdoor ring. It was only after Aveline had disappeared again and Joe had sidled up to the teacher with a shifty look on his face that Kanen'to:kon remembered the previous night.

"So," Joe said, clearly trying to seem nonchalent, "she storms off an awful lot, doesn't she?"

Will groaned from where he was lying on the ground at Kanen'to:kon's feet. The older boy, for all of the talent that he had previously shown in climbing and hiding, was terrible at sword-fighting. Kanen'to:kon, on the other hand, had felt completely at home the moment that a sword had been placed in his hand. He supposed that those times he and Ratonhnhake:ton had play-fought had taught him more than he knew.

Wiping the sweat from the back of his neck, however, Kanen'to:kon had to agree with Will's groan. He himself was not the most accomplished liar, he knew. In fact, only Ratonhnhake:ton had been worse back when he was at the village. But even he knew that Joe was going about things all wrong. With his hands folded behind his back and rocking back and forth from his heels to his toes, he was making his interest far too obvious to anyone watching him. A glance to Heiman's face simply confirmed what Kanen'to:kon already knew.

In answer to Joe's question, he simply grunted. "So she does," he said, his voice flat and inflectionless like when Kanen'to:kon spoke in English.

Joe was unaffected by the tone, and simply nodded, his head bobbing up and down like a leaf on a stream. "Yes, yes," he said a bit pompously, "it's kind of funny though, that she does it so often, you know?"

Heiman grunted.

"If one of us did that so often, we would be punished."

A grunt.

"She certainly doesn't seem to regret it though."

Another grunt.

"Almost as if she isn't being punished for constantly running off."

An explosive sigh.

Rubbing his face, Heiman turned to properly look at Joe. "What," he growled, "are you getting at?"

Joe held up his hands as if to ward off the older man's anger. "Nothing, nothing," he said, opening his eyes wide, "I was just commenting on something that I think everyone thinks is rather odd. I mean, we all remember the dressing down you gave Will the one time that he fell asleep after lunch and missed your lesson on tree-running."
Out of the corner of Kanen'to:kon's eye, he saw Will tense. Glancing around, he saw the other novices nodding at Joe's words, and made a mental note to ask the other boy what, exactly, had happened.

Heiman squared his shoulders and loomed over Joe with a stony expression. Uncrossing his arms, he placed them on his hips and lifted his chin so that he was looking down his nose at all of them.

"I see," he said, his voice cold. "So you all are questioning my decisions, are you? Thinking that I'm going soft?"

Now everyone looked alarmed. Heiman tended to spread around his displeasure with a big shovel.

"No, no," interjected James, lying on the ground where he had been tied up by Alice for some reason despite them studying sword-fighting, "you're the hardest man around here!"

"He certainly is."

Everyone jumped at the new voice that joined the conversation, even the teacher. There, standing at the edge of the fence and leaning on it with a sword at his hip was Mentor Davenport.

Kanen'to:kon bit his lip and looked down at his feet. The dirt that caked his knees and hands from the previous duels with Ed and Alice were stiff and thick, leaving blotchy patches that he knew would take scrubbing to get off before lunch. Next to the immaculate white coat that the Mentor wore, he felt very small and grubby.

Gracefully, Mentor Davenport jumped over the fence that encircled the ring and strolled closer to Kanen'to:kon and Will. Pausing beside Will, he looked down for a moment and cocked an eyebrow.

"If you stayed down this long in a fight, son," he said, "you'd be long dead."

Somehow, Will managed to get even redder under his sunburned and flushed cheeks. Kanen'to:kon scratched at his jaw and shuffled in embarrassment. He had not meant to embarrass the other boy. Despite his grouchiness, Will had actually been very welcoming to Kanen'to:kon, distracting Joe whenever he became a little too handsy and loud for Kanen'to:kon's taste.

"You, on the other hand," Mentor Davenport said, turning his head to look at Kanen'to:kon over his shoulder, "are doing quite well. Are you certain that you have had no previous training?"

Kanen'to:kon hunched in embarrassment, feeling the eyes of the others boring into him. "Not really," he said, "I only really know this much from playing with my friends back at my home."

Mentor Davenport's gaze flicked from his head to his toes, his face blank of any expression. His eyes, though, held a spark of suspicion. Kanen'to:kon squirmed and fought to keep from fiddling with his hair. The cravat that Ratonhnhake:ton had given him with the Templar cross on the ends was suddenly very tight around his throat. After what seemed to be an eternity, he finally turned away.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Kanen'to:kon nearly missed the Mentor's next words.

"So, Heiman," he said, a note of humour entering his voice, "you're having your hardness questioned?"

The teacher shifted from one foot to the other, looking just as uncomfortable as Kanen'to:kon had been just a few moments earlier. "Not really," he admitted, "just the usual whining that I'm too soft on one student and too hard on another." He jerked his head towards Joe. "You know how he gets."
"Indeed."

Turning on his heel, Mentor Davenport spread his arms out and surveyed them all, his eyes glittering in the shadow of his hood. Kanen'to:kon bit the inside of his lip nervously. Those eyes seemed to see right through him as they swept over him, like he was a bit of smoke from a cookfire on the breeze. For a wild moment, he was sure that all of his secrets had been laid bare, exposed to the world so that it could judge him. Then the gaze left him to look at James and the others, and Kanen'to:kon could breathe again.

"So," he said, "you are afraid of favouritism, hmm?" He took a step forward. "You feel that someone is getting out of being righteously punished?" He paused and looked over them again. It took a moment, but Kanen'to:kon eventually recognized that he was expected to answer. He mumbled his assent along with the others, not daring to look the Mentor in the eye and instead scuffing patterns in the dust with the tip of his sword.

"Well," Mentor Davenport said, folding his hands behind his back, "let me assure you that that sort of thing is not the case here. Mister Heiman here is not the sort to show blatant favouritism; believe me, if he hates any of you, he would not be so unprofessional as to show it."

"But what about Aveline," Joe interjected. Kanen'to:kon flinched at the look Mentor Davenport shot at the younger boy, but he seemed to ignore its silent warning. "She's been disappearing for days and skipping lessons, and she hasn't been punished for it at all!"

"Her punishment is not your concern," Mentor Davenport thundered. "The only thing that you should be worrying about is your own work, Joseph, and you would do well to focus more on it!" His gaze was flinty, and finally Joe took a step back, clearly realizing that he had crossed a line. Kanen'to:kon flinched despite not being the target of the shouting and lost the battle to keep from fiddling with his braids. No one was looking at each other, everyone finding something interesting in the dirt to stare at.

Glancing up through his eyelashes, Kanen'to:kon saw the Mentor take a deep breath and let it out his nose before shaking his head. When he opened his mouth to speak again, the anger had fled, leaving simple tiredness behind.

"In any case, I came out because I needed to talk to Heiman here," he said. When nobody moved, he added, "Alone."

There was a general shuffling and mumbling as they all began to file out of the ring. Kanen'to:kon bent slightly at the waist to offer his hand to Will, who took it and groaned as he was hauled to his feet.

"So much for that plan, eh?" Will murmured, subtly jerking his head towards the dejected-looking Joe. Kanen'to:kon shrugged, but Mentor Davenport's reaction to the mention of Aveline stayed in his head. Unwillingly, the memory of her in a dark kitchen rose up out of his hindbrain. Joe's little discussion last night had seemed foolish in the daylight, but the two things together...

Maybe there was something to his ranting.

Kanen'to:kon was both surprised and not surprised to be volunteered by Joe to follow Aveline into the forest the next day. Not surprised because he was a native, and even as isolated as the tribe had been he had known how helpless colonists were when they were in the forest, barely able to track or run or really do anything but go in circles and starve. Surprised, because he had been pretty sure that after the scolding that Joe had gotten from Mentor Davenport the younger boy would have had
the sense to reign back his investigation for a few days.

Still, he had dragged him aside and gotten the others to cover for his disappearance before pushing him to go after her, so Kanen'to:kon supposed that even if it was merely to achieve Joe's own ends, at least he was being included. Jumping from branch to branch, high above the ground, was a little nerve-wracking it was true, but it was still better than their daily forced march with the teacher barking in their ears for being too slow.

Pausing on the half-fallen trunk of a tree that had been split by lightning, Kanen'to:kon took a quick look around to make sure that he was still on the right track for following the other new person of the novices. The thick, sticky-hot air clung to his skin and made trickles of sweat soak down his collar. The heat wave that was going on had completely snuck up on everyone, being completely unseasonal. It made training even worse than it already was, to the point where even the teacher, who in Kanen'to:kon's short experience, was a complete heartless man, give them breaks every half hour.

There. Kanen'to:kon narrowed his eyes and jumped down from the tree. Crouching down, he took a close look at the ground and undergrowth around him. Several branches were snapped, showing their green insides and oozing sap. The leaves that had fallen to the ground had also been disturbed, and recently too if the disturbed earth was anything to go by.

Standing up, he brushed himself off. Placing each foot in front of the other with care, he tried to keep from making any noise as he followed the trail. The path meandered through the undergrowth, crashing through low bushes and leaves. Animal tracks also littered the ground, having clearly fled the area as Aveline had rushed through. Even the birds had left, with only a few small nests in the higher tree boughs letting Kanen'to:kon know that they had been there.

The faint sound of a sob floated through the air and reached his ears. Tensing, Kanen'to:kon looked around. If he was close to Aveline, then he would have to take to the trees again to keep from being spotted.

Climbing up the trunk of the nearest tree, a small niggling voice in his brain began to whisper about how he had never been good at hide and seek or hunting. Gritting his teeth and with the sound of sobs in his ears, he banished the voice from his mind. Yes, Ratonhnhake:ton had always been able to find him when they were small, and no matter what bait he used the animals that they hunted in the valley always seemed to stay away. Yes, the others in their village had teased him for it, saying that of course he could not catch anything, the animals could hardly help but hear him crashing around in the undergrowth. At times, it had seemed that only Ratonhnhake:ton had believed in him.

He remembered how Ratonhnhake:ton had just laughed when the other children had teased him, slinging an arm around his shoulders and offering to show him a few tricks during their free time. According to him, Kanen'to:kon was not that bad for their age, merely lacking confidence. His sweet words were a balm to Kanen'to:kon's wounded pride, and his tips had him eventually catching up to the other hunters.

Kanen'to:kon let out a puff of air as he finished hoisting himself onto a tree branch and stood up. Gently, he shook his head to banish the memories of Ratonhnhake:ton. It was not what he should be focusing on right now.

Leaping from branch to branch, the sobbing got louder and louder as he got closer to its source. It rang oddly in his ears; Kanen'to:kon furrowed his brow as he jumped, trying to figure out why. It was only once he finally reached the clearing where Aveline was that he understood, chills rocking up his spine.
She was smiling. Covering her eyes and rocking back and forth on her knees, her sobs were the only noise in the clearing as he settled in a branch across the clearing from her. Her hair, still pulled back into braids hung limply around her shoulders, the ribbons coming loose and almost falling out of them. Wetness streaked her cheeks, obvious even from where Kanen'to:kon was standing, and yet her mouth was pulled back into the rictus of a rotting corpse, its teeth standing out bone-white against the putrefying flesh. The noises coming out of her mouth was not laughter, despite the smile, being the deep, gulping sobs of a young child that wracked the body until one was dizzy and on the verge of collapsing, unable to breathe.

Kanen'to:kon was not sure how long he stood, watching her sob and smile and rock on the ground. Slowly, slowly her sobs began to quiet, her breathing even out. Her hands, curled into fists so tight that the knuckles were pale and then pressed against her eyes loosened. Sniffling, she took deep breaths and began to wipe her cheeks clean with her hands, still coughing out the occasional sob when he shifted, his fingers digging into the tree's bark and she suddenly looked up.

Kanen'to:kon froze. Her reddened eyes bored into him. He wasn't sure who was more surprised between the two of them, him at her looking up so suddenly or her at him even being there. For what felt like an eternity, they just stared at each other. He with his eyes opened wide enough that he could feel the tension at the corners of them, and her with her mouth slowly opening and closing like a landed fish.

"You-" she began to say, her tone cracking from her crying session.

He turned and launched himself back the way he came. The trees blurred past him as he ran, his body automatically knowing exactly what it was doing.

Her crying, he realized as he ran, was the same as before. That night in the kitchen, with the tea and the moonlight, it had been the same. She had been weeping, but her face had not been showing the right emotion.

Did the teachers know of this? Part of him suspected that that was the case. They were possibly letting her go just so that she did not humiliate herself in front of the others. But could she not control it, keep it from happening during training? And what had caused such a disconnect between her emotions in the first place?

He had never felt more confused in his life.

By the time everyone had piled back into the room after dinner, Joe was lying on his back on his bed with his feet stomping out a pattern against the wall and a frown on his face. If Kanen'to:kon hadn't been so tired, he probably would have simply left the room again, unwilling to put up with his pouting. As it was, though, he just flopped onto his own bed and folded his hands over his stomach, trying to keep his eyes from closing.

The rest of the novices were quick to follow. Once again, James and Alice cuddled up together on James' bed, their arms wrapped around each other. Will too mimicked his position from the previous night; face down and groaning against the covers. Ed was the only one, it seemed, who preferred a different position. He leaned against the whitewashed doorway with his thin arms folded over his chest and a frown on his face.

Joe was apparently paying more attention than Kanen'to:kon thought, for as soon as Ed took up his position against the doorway, he stopped stomping on the wall and sat up so that his feet were on the floor.
"So," he said, clapping his hands together, "I now call this meeting to order."

"Fer fuck's sake," grumbled Will. As always, Joe ignored him.

"Now today was not the most auspicious in our joint investigation," Joe said, "but I would like to emphasize that such days happen to everyone and anyone, and should not discourage us from getting to the bottom of things."

Ed snorted. "Upset that you got caught out by the Mentor?" he asked, his voice sickly-sweet.

Joe's pout returned momentarily, and he turned his head slightly to glare at the older boy out of the corner of his eye. Ed rolled his eyes and held up his hands.

Satisfied, he continued on with his speech, a pompous expression coming across his face.

"As I was saying, days like this happen to everyone and anyone, and we should not be discouraged. However, even if we did not find out as much as we wanted to today, every bit of information can be useful. Ganen-doe-go, please share what you learned this afternoon by following our subject."

Kanen'to:kon jumped slightly and rubbed his eyes. He had almost fallen asleep there. But looking around, he saw that everyone's eyes were on him, and so, sighing, he sat up and crossed his legs.

"I followed Aveline into the forest where she disappeared as you asked," he said, ignoring the curdling in his stomach. This felt wrong to him. What he had seen in the forest had been very intimate and strange, not something to be lightly shared. But underneath the gazes of his fellow novices, he found the words tumbling out of his mouth. "And when I found her, she was crying."

"Whoop-dee-do," growled Will, "the girl was homesick or something. Mystery solved. Now we can go to sleep."

Joe swelled in irritation. "That's not all!" he half-shouted, sticking his finger in Kanen'to:kon's face, "you saw something else! Tell them!"

Kanen'to:kon jerked away from the finger and for a moment, entertained the idea of refusing and following Will's example.

But her face...

"She was smiling as she cried," he muttered, not looking anyone in the eye. "She showed all of her teeth, but she was sobbing. And..."

Joe leaned forward.

"And before this started, I saw her crying another time. But her expression was different. She just looked..." Kanen'to:kon searched for the right word to describe the look that had been on her face. Bored? Irritated? "Like she was waiting for the tears to stop. Not upset."

"Wait, you saw something weird earlier?" demanded James. He adjusted his spectacles furiously. "Why didn't you tell us anything earlier?"

Kanen'to:kon squirmed in his seat, but was saved by Joe leaping to his feet.

"It doesn't matter that he didn't tell us right away, James," he said scathingly. "He couldn't have possibly realized the importance of what he saw earlier. What's important is that he did tell us now. Now, during that time with our teacher and Mentor Davenport, they became angry with us for
asking questions about Aveline disappearing. Why," he said, waving his hands in the air, "would they be so concerned with conserving her dignity?"

Silence met his rhetorical question. Kanen'to:kon's was because he wasn't sure where the younger boy was going with this. From the other's expressions, their silence was more from long-suffering patience.

"I'll tell you why," Joe said, his voice grave, "It has something to do with real Assassin business."

"Which means that it isn't any of our business," muttered Alice.

"Au contraire, my fellow novices," said Joe, sticking a finger into the air, "if it affects our training the way it has, it is completely our business."

"It's only affected our training because you keep throwing fits about it," said Ed.

"Nonsense! With her disappearing every day to go off and have such disturbing emotional fits, we find ourselves distracted. Thus distracted, we no longer pay attention to our training, consumed with curiosity as to what is going on."

"I wasn't really curious."

"Neither was I. At least, not until you kept throwing a fit about it."

"- and we end up as sub-par Assassins, causing damage in the field to our very Brotherhood!"

"So then what do you propose we do," asked Will, sitting up. His eyes glittered. At that question, Kanen'to:kon saw Joe pause, momentarily at a loss for words. But he rallied before anyone could say anything about it.

"We must continue our activities," he said dramatically, his finger back in the air, "until our curiosity is satisfied."

"Or," came the soft, French-accented voice, "you could simply ask me what was going on."

Everyone jumped. There, standing in the doorway in a white be-ruffled nightgown and her hair half-undone from its braids stood Aveline with a candle in hand.

As she took a step into the room, everyone except for Kanen'to:kon took a step away from her. It was not due to bravery that Kanen'to:kon stayed though; he was simply too paralyzed from shock and embarrassment to move. He could feel his cheeks and ears burning, and wondered just how long the older girl had been listening in on them. From the cool glance that she shot his way, it was quite a while.

Slowly and with great grace, she walked into the room, practically gliding across the floorboards. The others shuffled back a few more steps. Joe was practically plastered to the wall beside his bed. Placing her candle on the bedside table, she then lowered herself down to sit beside Kanen'to:kon, smoothing the wrinkles from her night dress.

Sitting so close to her, he couldn't help but notice how the pale lacy collar set off her skin, its fine weave practically glowing in the candlelight.

Folding one hand over the other, she straightened her back and tapped her thumb.

"This is not a story I wish to have to repeat," she said quietly, her voice soft and yet carrying to
everyone's ears with no problem, "so if you could all sit down where you can hear me, I will explain myself now."

There was some quiet rustling as people got up to come sit down on the Joe's bed. Everyone seemed embarrassed, too embarrassed to speak or look Aveline in the eye as they settled down again. Kanen'to:kon did not dare move from his own seat. He stood stiff-backed beside her, his own fingers interlaced so tightly that his knuckles were white. Once everything had quieted down again, Aveline licked her lips and looked down at her hands, her eyelashes fluttering against her cheekbones.

"How many of you have heard of the Apple of Eden?"

Chapter End Notes

Aw yeah, now we're going somewhere!

As always, let me know what you think in the comments! I feed off of your tortured cries for more! :P
Alright, I was a little unsure of this chapter; I skipped around a lot, so please let me know if it worked!

Aveline was twelve years old and furious.

Her lip stung and felt hot from where the slaver had struck her. Her eyes felt hotter from crying.

Sniffling quietly and rubbing her nose with the heel of the hand, she took a deep breath to steady herself. She knew what she had seen before her mother had left her. Her mother had been worried, very worried about something. Lying on her bed while her mother sat at her small writing desk, she had noticed the pinched look around the corners of her mouth and the tiredness in her eyes that had haunted her features for weeks. Then, after locking herself in the parlour with Madeleine for hours, she had come out looking far more relaxed. She had been happy when they had gone for their walk. And then she had disappeared.

Obviously, Madeleine was behind this.

So as the older pale-skinned woman swept past Aveline and swept down the stairs of their house, Aveline stood up from where she had been crouching in the doorway of one of the servants' rooms and swiftly began to tiptoe her way to her step-mother's room.

Gently closing the heavy door with a click, Aveline turned and smoothed her hands over the front of her skirt. The lushly-appointed room was neat, the covers on her bed smooth and wrinkle-less and her many little pots of cosmetics lined up in front of the polished mirror of her boudoir. Nothing was conveniently lying around in the open that would tell Aveline what had gone on between her stepmother and her mother.

Absently, Aveline licked the still-healing split in her upper lip. She only had a limited time to search for proof to show her father. Taking a breath, she focused her senses until -

The world drained of its colours, leaving only the faint outlines of furniture and decorations. Aveline slowly turned around, looking for the golden glow that would signify a hiding spot for proof. The walls were empty, with only the glowering faces of past L'Isles looking down on her. The bookcase was similarly dark, the titles barely visible. But there, under the bed, was a glowing rectangle.

Aveline grinned until a sharp pain reminded her of her still-healing mouth. Trying to control her excitement, she dropped to her knees and crawled underneath the bed. It was dark, with the thick blankets blocking out most of the light from the room's window, but her special vision had no trouble making out the seams of the floor's hidden compartment.

Feeling along the edges, she was surprised how well the little compartment had been made. The little compartment's lid, barely bigger than a cat, was so well-fitted that she could barely fit her fingernails in between it and the floor, and yet was light enough that she nearly dropped it in surprise when it finally popped out.
Carefully placing the lid to one side, Aveline saw that in the little compartment was a small wooden chest with a handle on its lid. Lifting it out, she crawled back out from under the bed and dragged it with her to better see what was in it. It was surprisingly heavy, making her wonder what was in it. Paper certainly couldn't weigh so much!

Opening the lid, a metal ball, grooved with thin lines, greeted her vision. Tucked in around it were several folded pieces of paper, scrawled with odd little signs and words, but even as she pulled them out to start peering at them closely, they slipped from her fingers, falling carelessly to the floor.

Quiet noises, rising and falling like voices behind a door, began to fill her ears. As if hypnotized, Aveline reached towards it, the sheen of its surface filling her vision. Its metal was warm underneath her trembling fingers, and as she lifted it from its case, soft golden light began to pour out of its lines, pulsing mesmerizingly.

The sound of the door closing made her jump. Looking over her shoulder, her heart leapt into her throat.

Madeleine was standing in front of the room's only door, her hands folded in front of her and an inscrutable look on her face.

"Aveline," she said, her voice soft, "what do you think you're doing?"

Aveline's mouth went dry. Opening her mouth, she only managed to make a small, croaking noise. Her skirts rustling, Madeleine crossed the room and knelt down beside her, her face still inscrutable. Her hands were gentle, though, as they took the metal ball from Aveline's nerveless fingers.

"This is my private property," she said, her voice still soft. "I had hidden it for a reason."

"I -"

"How were you able to find it, anyways?"

Aveline flushed and felt very silly, all of a sudden. "My mother, she -"

Madeleine's eyes narrowed.

"She told you of it?"

Aveline shook her head frantically.

"No, no!" she said, crumpling the fabric of her skirt between her fingers. "I just - Mother, she was talking to you before she disappeared - my eyes are special, they show me things -"

An odd look flashed across Madeleine's face, too quickly for Aveline to identify it.

"Your eyes are special?" she said slowly.

Aveline felt her cheeks and ears heating. "Things that are of interest to me, they glow gold - Mother disappeared after she talked to you!" she blurted out. She bit her lip, the familiar feeling of tears welling up in her eyes making her blink rapidly. "I was going to find something - show it to father -"

She felt more than saw Madeleine tense beside her, and then her pale fingers were digging into
Aveline's jaw, turning her head and forcing her to look at the metal ball that was now glowing as bright as the sun -

"Aveline," said Madeleine, her voice smooth yet menacing, like honey flowing over broken glass, "I had nothing to do with your mother's disappearance." Everything was melting away around Aveline, leaving only the light from the metal ball and her step-mother's voice -

"I had nothing to do with your mother's disappearance, Aveline."

The light pulsed like a heartbeat and sent jagged lances into her head -

"I had nothing to do with your mother's disappearance, Aveline."

- she could feel water dripping down her cheeks, she was grinding her teeth as those words began to burn their way into her very mind -

"I had nothing to do with your mother's disappearance, Aveline."

- her head was splitting, spilling everything that she was like a torrent of water down a riverbed her eyes were burning and melting and she was disintegrating underneath the light -

"You had nothing to do with Maman's disappearance," Aveline heard herself say. Then she felt her lips curl into a soft smile, her face relax. Madeleine was smiling too. She let go of Aveline's jaw and gently brushed her knuckles against it like an apology.

"I'm glad that you understand, Aveline," she said, her voice a parody of motherly warmth. Aveline wanted to spit in her face, to hurl herself at her and bite and scratch until she stopped lying -

But she couldn't.

Madeleine put the metal ball back in the box and put the box back underneath the bed before gracefully rising to her feet and holding out her hand. Aveline watched as her body reached out and took it, and watched as they walked out the door, and watched as they ate dinner and listened as Madeleine lied to her Papa and said that she had sought her out for comfort and her mouth agreed, saying that Madeleine had been very nice to her and watched as her Papa smiled and said that he was glad that they were getting along and that Aveline was feeling better.

Aveline was thirteen and wanted to scream.

Aveline's body sniffed in the church's pew, allowing a few small tears escape her eyes as she stared at her Papa's casket. The priest droned on and on about about what a good man her Papa had been, how very respected he had been in the community, how very much he would be missed by his wife and daughter...

Aveline wanted to yell. Aveline wanted to scream the truth to the rafters of the stinking, stuffy church that the funeral was taking place in. Her Papa had not died from cholera, he had been murdered. Madeleine L'Isle had poisoned him, and she had made Aveline help.

More tears trickled leisurely down her cheeks. Her Papa had been so brave near the end. He had held her hands between his, too weak to even speak above a whisper, when he had told her how happy she made him. How if he had been able to do it all over again, he would have been happy to just stay with her and Maman, just the three of them.

Oh, how she wished that he had! She would have never ended up under Madeleine's control, forced
to smile and simper and spoon another mouthful of foxglove-laced soup into his mouth. Madeleine
would not be dragging her into her study every night to reinforce her control with that awful metal
ball. It would have just been them, happy and safe like she remembered them being in her earliest
memories.

Her arms ached from last night's reinforcement. She had spat and screamed, fighting to get away
from that woman and go tell someone, anyone, about what she had done to her for two years for far
longer and harder than she had for nearly a year. It had been no use, though. Madeleine had been
stronger and faster, easily able to dodge her clumsy blows and wrench her arms up behind her back.
A blow to the back of Aveline's knees had sent her to her ground, and then the light had burned her
resistance away.

A gentle touch to arm got her body's attention. Looking over, Aveline saw Madeleine handing her a
handkerchief, a falsly sympathetic look on her face. Aveline wanted to claw her eyes out of her
head. Her body, however, was as obedient to Madeleine's will as ever. It took her handkerchief
with a whispered thank you and delicately dabbed at her cheeks and eyes as Aveline snarled.

She would kill her someday, Aveline promised herself. She would kill Madeleine L'Isle and her
friends for everything that she had done.

Aveline was fourteen and afraid.

After her Papa's death, Aveline had found herself at loose ends. Even with her vow to kill
Madeleine, it had been so hard to keep going in the face of her hopelessness. It was like she was
trapped underneath ice, pounding at it and screaming as people walked by, completely oblivious.
Only her vow to find a way to kill Madeleine for what she had done kept her from completely
surrendering to the Apple's glow.

It was learning the name of the artifact that kept her enslaved that gave her hope. Madeleine, as it
turned out, had many friends; it was those friends that she had killed Aveline's Papa for. Without
her Papa to get suspicious, Madeleine now had them coming over under various pretences to visit.
During these visits, she liked to have Aveline serving tea and snacks, and it was here that Aveline
learned the name of her enemy.

The Templars.

Looking around the house that she and Madeleine shared, Aveline was now able to see their mark
everywhere. Their even-armed cross was subtly woven into decorations and and furniture, even the
jewellery that Madeleine had Aveline wear. A particular enamelled red necklace was a favourite of
the older woman's; it was short, the cross pendant lying in the hollow of her throat, and felt like
nothing more than a collar every time she was forced to put it on.

It was during one of these meetings in the house that she heard a certain comment for the first time
that had chilled her blood.

"So, are you planning on keeping those special eyes of your daughter's in the Order?"

Madeleine looked up from over her tea cup at the man who had spoken. Aveline's body continued
to pour cups of tea for the other men in the room that Madeleine was holding court over, but
mentally, her eyes widened. What did he mean by keeping her eyes in the order?

"But of course," murmured Madeleine, "I would be remiss in my duties if I did not think upon such
things."
The man who had spoken shifted in his seat, his tea sloshing gently in the cup. "And?"

Madeleine smirked.

"I suppose," she said, raising her eyebrows, "that I am waiting for the right man to come along for her. After all, she is my dear stepdaughter; I would hate to leave her in the care of an untrustworthy fellow."

Oh god. Aveline handed the last tea cup out and picked up the tray to return it to the kitchen. With a short bow, she walked out of the room, her mind spinning and her face placid. They were talking about marrying her off. About breeding her like a dog.

Aveline supposed that to a certain type of man, her compliance would seem attractive. To have a completely obedient wife who would bring good little Templars into the world and always agree with her husband. She had been aware that she would, as a woman, be expected to marry some day, ever since she was a little girl. But -

But she had thought, had hoped, she supposed, that that day she married someone, she would be able to properly say yes. To actually interact with her husband, not simply be his fucktoy or bitch that would whelp good puppies.

But no one in that room had said anything. Madeleine had even admitted to considering the plan.

Putting the tray back in the kitchen, Aveline nodded to the chef and went to bed, far too aware of the discussion going on in the study below.

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Aveline was sixteen and free.

The dinner had started well, Aveline supposed. At the very least, it had started well for Madeleine. Aveline had as ever been sitting quietly in her seat with her eyes cast demurely downwards, cutting off small slivers of meat that she then daintily lifted to her mouth and daintily chewed and daintily swallowed. Later that night, her body would undoubtedly daintily shit it out as well.

Madeleine, on the other hand, was having an enjoyable discussion about shipping certain goods up the coast to the English colonies with another woman. Apparently representing her father's lucrative Atlantic shipping business, the widow Scott had apparently decided that out of all of New Orleans' merchants, she much preferred to work with a woman of a 'similar situation' when it came to storing the goods that made up the aforementioned lucrative shipping business. Madeleine had been quite pleased by that, humming a lullaby as she had looked over the reports from both her business and from her Templar lackeys.

Just the sheer happiness that the widow Scott brought Madeleine made Aveline hate her. Her body looked across the table at the woman as she placidly chewed. The white-haired woman, still handsome in her fifties, wore a pale yellow dress with a lacey neckerchief covering her chest demurely, her hair piled high on her head and held in place with what looked like diamond pins. Her dark, heavy-lidded eyes stared back at Aveline with no shame as she chewed her own piece of meat. Even as she chewed, a small, unwavering smile, like she knew something that Aveline didn't, stayed fixed firmly in place on her crimson lips.

Aveline wanted to slap it off of her face.

After the last little bits of sauce had been sopped up and the dishes taken away, wine was brought out. Immediately, Aveline's body got to its feet, its mouth opening to say what was no doubt a pretty little excuse to leave the table when Madeleine gently reached out and took her hand,
tugging her back down into her seat.

Aveline wished that she could rip her hand away.

"Aveline, ma petite," Madeleine said, her eyes filled with false affection, "please, stay for just a little while longer. You have been such a great help with Mrs Scott, you deserve this wine just as much as I do."

Her body smiled and murmured something about being flattered, accepting the wine glass that was pressed into her hand. With an imperious gesture, Madeleine dismissed the last servant from the room to go get some cheeses to go with the wine.

The door to the room closed with a rather final click.

Aveline's body sipped at its wine quietly, smiling and softly answering the occasional answer that came its way. The house was very quiet around her. Aside from the servants needed to serve dinner, most of the rest had been sent back to their homes. The small creaks then, unmistakably rhythmic as footsteps, caught her attention even as her mouth prattled on about something to do with cloth imports from the West Indies.

The footsteps couldn't have been the servants. It was still summer, so they were not needed to warm up the beds before Aveline and Madeleine went to bed, and any of the other servants would have had no reason to be upstairs. So who could it be?

Time dragged past agonizingly. As Mrs Scott and Madeleine prattled on, Aveline tried to focus in on the sounds. They moved along steadily throughout the house, sometimes pausing as if the owner of the feet was stopping to look for something. Thinking over the layout of the house, Aveline realized that they were going from room to room. Obviously, they were looking for something. A small stab of hope lanced through her. If they found the Apple, took it away -

She could be free. Madeleine had to use the Apple every night to keep control of Aveline, and if she did not tonight...

Well. The possibilities were endless.

Excitement began to pool in her, but before it could get too great, she heard a noise that made it plummet back down. There was a certain creak in the house that came from the stair right in the middle of the main staircase. Aveline knew it well, had known it well, as before the Apple she had always jumped over it. After the Apple, she had trod on it every day, its creak signifying her lack of control over her own body. More importantly, though, it meant that the thieves upstairs were coming down.

"Now where is that cheese," asked Madeleine, dragging Aveline's attention back to her. She looked slightly irritated, tapping a fingernail against her glass. "They should have been back ages ago."

Mrs Scott chuckled into her own wineglass. "Ah, it's quite alright Madame L'Isle, this wine speaks for itself quite well."

Then the doors were flung open and something was chucked into the room.

It spewed thick, brown smoke, filling the room quickly. Before she lost all sight, Aveline saw Madeleine standing up and pulling a knife out of a hidden pocket and engaging a hooded man with blades coming out of his wrists. Aveline's body stood up, alarmed and squinting as its eyes watered. These were not burglars. Burglars did not have smoke bombs, or hidden blades. That meant that it could only be Assassins, the Templars' enemy -
And the Assassins could only think that Aveline was a Templar. The sharp edges of her necklace dug into the flesh of her throat. Her eyes darted around - would she be next?

A cry rang out through the room. The smoke, so thick for those few seconds, began to clear, revealing one of the men on the ground, clutching his leg and the other hanging back with his arm hanging limp and bloody at his side. Madeleine was standing in a battle-ready position, her blade red.

Aveline bit her lip. As injured as the Assassins were, she could tell from the looks in their eyes that they weren't about to quit fi-

Aveline bit her lip.

Avelle bit her lip.

Wildly, she looked around for a clock, the back of her mind glorying in the feeling of being able to move her own body.

There, on the mantelpiece where it always was, was the small clock that her Papa had bought for her Maman, once upon a time. Looking at where the hands were pointing, Aveline could hardly believe it.

Madeleine, she had missed the time where she usually reinforced her control! Digging her fingers into the tablecloth, Aveline realized that she was free.

She was halfway through swinging her chair at Madeleine's head before she noticed the shiny blades at Mrs Scott's wrists as well.
"I don't really remember much after that," Aveline said quietly, drawing her knees up to her chest and resting her chin on them. "Only little bits. Madeleine," she sighed heavily, "her dead, her skull cracked open. Being hustled into a carriage and leaving. Getting on a ship to come up here. After that, I ended up at Mrs Scott's house, but I -" She bit her lip and made a frustrated gesture. "Mrs Scott thinks that after being suppressed for so long, I didn't know how to deal with feeling things so strongly. I found myself crying and laughing hysterically at the strangest times. I could fly into rages at the smallest thing, even though I knew that it was silly. Finally, she decided that she could not train me in the city. Not safely, at least. So she took me to Mentor Davenport, begging him to allow me to train here, where my fits could be more easily hidden."

The room was silent.

Kanen'to:kon didn't feel sleepy anymore. The only thing keeping him from driving his nails into the palms of his hands was the thin layer of fabric that made up his shirt.

That tale. It was almost unbelievable. A magical ball made of metal, that glowed and enslaved her body but left her mind alone to scream.

He trembled.

Such a cruel device.

"S-so, when you disappear..." Joe said, his eyes wide and shiny in the flickering candlelight.

"It is because I have felt a new attack coming on," Aveline completed. She was looking blankly into the distance, seeing something that no one else could see. "Mrs. Scott made sure that Mentor Davenport and the teachers here knew of my condition so that they could give me the appropriate amount of slack when I find that I have to leave for a while."

The room fell into silence again. Kanen'to:kon looked down at his hands and bit his lip.

Her story, while fantastic, did have the ring of truth about it. Mentor Davenport had mentioned the Apple of Eden after Kanen'to:kon had told him of the star-woman, warning him of how they spoke to people through their powerful devices. His story of Ezio in particular, and the woman known as Minerva...

A soft whisper started up in the back of his head, growing stronger by the minute.

Was this what the star-woman was warning him about? Was Ratonnzhake:ton in danger because he was under the Templar's control already, like Aveline had been? He began to think back on how Ratonnzhake:ton had acted, the last time he saw him. He had been cheerful; excited to go back to his father in New York.

Was his father the one who would harm Ratonnzhake:ton? Almost as soon as the thought appeared, Kanen'to:kon rejected it. Ratonnzhake:ton's uncle, Otetieni, he knew the man. He had spoken with him, watched him when the man had first taken Ratonnzhake:ton back to the colonist world. He had told of how Ratonnzhake:ton's father had been frantic when he was stolen from his bed. How he had sworn to protect him.
No, his father would not hurt Ratonhnhake:ton, nor would he willingly allow Ratonhnhake:ton to be hurt. If anything...

Kanen'to:kon's gut clenched.

If anything, Ratonhnhake:ton's father would probably end up a victim like Aveline's father. And Ratonhnhake:ton -

Kanen'to:kon knew Ratonhnhake:ton. If he knew who had harmed his father, their would be no way that he would not attack the Templars.

The vision that the woman had given him rose to the forefront of his mind. Ratonhnhake:ton's face slack with death. The village destroyed. The man in the tricorn hat.

They would use him to find the Sanctuary, and kill him after he was no longer useful. That had to be what the woman had meant.

"Jesus," whispered Ed. Kanen'to:kon looked up, jerked out of his thought. The other boy had sat down on one of the beds, his eyes wide as well. "I can't believe she made you go to your own father's funeral as a puppet, even."

Aveline shrugged, still not looking at any of them. "Well," she said, "it was not as if she could just let me go as myself. I would have killed her. But it would have been strange if I had not shown up, either. So I suppose she compromised."

"At least you got to go and mourn -" Alice started.

"No."

The sheer volume and vehemence of Aveline's voice was startling. Properly looking over, Kanen'to:kon saw a flame of pure rage in her eyes. Her hands were fists in her nightgown. "The creature that mourned that day was not me. It was a doll that Madeleine allowed to cry a few tears and looked good beside her. It was not me!"

Pity welled up in Kanen'to:kon. He hadn't realized it when she was telling her story, but thinking about it now, it was obvious. The rage that had had her trembling while she was speaking of that moment had returned to her, pressing her lips together in a bloodless line. It was clear that being unable to properly, fully mourn her father was deeply hurting her.

Before he could say anything though, there was a loud knocking at the door. Before anyone could get up from where they were sitting, the doorknob twisted and the door was flung open, revealing Heiman and the man Kanen'to:kon had sat beside for dinner the other day. What was his name again? Donald?

"Alright, my little chickadees," growled Heiman, glaring at all of them. Behind him, Donald crossed his arms. "I was willing to overlook your little escapades at night so long as you stayed quiet. But if you're going to be shouting about something -"

Aveline darted to her feet.

"Monsieur Heiman, please," she said, quickly wiping her cheeks clean, "it is my fault, not theirs. I had one of my...fists."

Heiman pressed his lips together and looked at her with narrow eyes. Kanen'to:kon tried not to sweat. He did not know what Heiman had been about to threaten them with, but he doubted that it
would be pleasant.

After letting them all squirm for a few moments, he grunted, clearly not pleased.

"Fine," he said, "dare I ask why you were here in the first place anyways?"

Aveline bit her lower lip and shook her head.

Heiman grunted again.

"Then get back to bed," he said, his voice softening from angry to stern. "I'm not slacking off on you all just because you didn't get enough sleep."

A mumble of assent went through the room. A general shuffling ensued as people either got in or got out of beds, muttering apologies as they bumped into each other.

Kanen'to:kon, at least, did not have to get up. Sliding underneath his covers, he pulled them up until they were around his neck. The click as the door shut after Aveline and Alice had left echoed through the room, leaving them all to mull over what they had learned that night.

The next morning was awkward. No one was looking directly at Aveline as she sat quietly at the table, working her way through a bowl of porridge and some bacon. Kanen'to:kon could not bring himself to blame them, and not just because he was one of the people that couldn't bring themselves to look at her. After all, what did you say after getting such an explanation?

What really bothered Kanen'to:kon was her words right before they had been interrupted by Heiman. He didn't even have to close his eyes to see the rage and sorrow on her face as she had shouted how it hadn't been her weeping during her father's funeral, but her step-mother's doll.

His gut clenched at the very thought. To not be able to properly mourn, to make one's peace with the death of a loved one? He could barely imagine such pain. And yet she was sitting at the table now, quietly eating her breakfast with a stoicism that would put the warriors of his village to shame.

Still, her 'fits', as she called them, showed just how much of a lie that calm was. She needed to properly mourn, and soon. That, Kanen'to:kon believed, would help her get her emotions back to normal. But how to bring up the idea?

It was almost a relief when Heiman burst into the room and started to roar at them to get moving.

"COME ON, NOVICES!" he shouted, striding into the room. Kanen'to:kon saw that Joe nearly choked on his bacon. Hastily swallowing his own mouthful, Kanen'to:kon stood up and only just caught his chair from clattering to the floor as he joined the mass of bodies flowing through the door and away from Heiman's shouting.

"Jeez," muttered Joe as he trotted outside into the sunshine beside him, "what crawled up his ass and died this early in the morning?"

"Wish it would crawl down his throat sometime," said Will on Kanen'to:kon's other side, rubbing his ears. "Would certainly spare my ears."

Other than some muttered complaints, though, there was very little noise from their usually loud group. Looking around, Kanen'to:kon noticed that their awkwardness was extending towards Aveline even outside of eating. As they walked down the road to the paddock where they would be
practising sword-fighting again, there was a wide gap between the dark-skinned girl and everyone else. She could have put her arms out and not touched anyone.

It even extended into practice. When Heiman told them to get into partners, the others milled around, conspicuously avoiding looking at her.

Kanen'to:kon pressed his lips together. Aveline stood a little ways away from the milling group, leaning against the fence with her arms crossed across her chest. She was returning the favour that they had granted her and not looking at any of them, instead staring off into the woods with a sword at her side, its tip dragging in the dust.

Looking over, he saw that their teacher was now looking at them from his place in the middle of the ring. He wasn't tapping his toe, though, like he usually did when they took too long. Instead, he was staring at them with a speculative look on his face, and Kanen'to:kon had the feeling that he knew what Aveline had told them the other night.

Disgust suddenly welled up within him. It was aimed at the others, but also him.

Aveline had done something very brave the other night. It was nothing like what the great legendary warriors of the Iroquois had done to become legends; she had not hunted the Sky-Bear or brought peace to the land through diplomacy. But it was brave all the same. She had shown her heart to strangers, shared her struggles so that they would understand her better, and in the process opened herself up to the vulnerability of humiliation that she was now going through.

And he was part of the problem. He knew what she had spoken of was hard to understand. That it was hard to treat someone the same after they had gone through such things. But even if she spent most of her time having to leave to get her emotions under control, she was still the same person at heart that she had been the day before. And that person, who worked hard without complaint, did not deserve this.

Kanen'to:kon took a step forward. Then another.

"Hello," he said to her.

She looked towards him sharply.

Silence fell, like ripples from a rock dropped in a puddle. He could feel the gazes of the others boring into his back.

"Your story last night - what your step-mother did to you - it was not right." Her dark eyes widened slightly at his words. He heard gasps behind him. "My people have certain ways of mourning. I-I don't know all the chants, and I don't have everything needed here, but -" and he could feel his face burning, "would you like me to sing your father's soul to rest? So that you can properly grieve?"

The only sound was the cicadas droning. Kanen'to:kon's face felt like it was on fire. His hands, curled into fists by his sides, were trembling. He knew that his people's ways were not the colonists' ways - that Aveline might take offense at him offering to have her mourn her father with a 'pagan' ritual - but he had to offer. She had to mourn, properly. Or else her grief would fester inside of her.

She blinked once, slowly, her doe eyes looking suspiciously shiny, and nodded her head jerkily.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I would appreciate that."

He let out a breath that he hadn't realized he was holding.
"It might take a while to find the proper instruments," he warned, still feeling shaky.

"I had the feeling it might be like that," she replied. Her gaze slid to one side. "Will you - will you let me know when you have everything prepared?"

Now it Kanen'to:kon's turn to feel tongue-tied. Licking his lips nervously, he nodded.

"I will," he promised.

"Alright then," Heiman broke in. Kanen'to:kon jumped and whirled around. He hadn't even noticed the other man moving closer. "If you two are done, how about you partner up for the day as well?" His voice was far softer than Kanen'to:kon had ever heard before, it gruff rumble softened down to a kitten's purr. Glancing back towards Aveline, he saw that she did not look particularly put out about the suggestion.

"A-alright," he stuttered, turning back to the teacher. The man nodded once, sharply, with a look in his eyes that almost looked like... pride. Then he turned and began to lambaste the others in the group, who were still massed together in a huddle.

Kanen'to:kon could feel Aveline's warmth, standing so close to him. Her face was still stoic, but close as he was, he noticed how it had softened somewhat. Become less intimidating. And he wondered at the idea that such a small offer had managed that.

It took far less time than Kanen'to:kon expected to get all of the things he needed together. The people that made their homes in the small settlement that surrounded the manor were surprisingly obliging towards some of his stranger requests; so obliging that Kanen'to:kon was forced to wonder if perhaps someone was leaning on them to make their prices more affordable for a young Native man with almost none of their money to his name. Seeing Heiman poking his head out of a back room at one point before disappearing just added more fuel.

But whatever it was, Kanen'to:kon was just grateful that he managed to get so much of what he needed so quickly. Or at least, a fair substitute. Leaning over, he brushed his fingers along the multi-coloured beads that had been strung together on a string into a necklace. The lady had called it a rosary when she sold it to him. Although it was not the wampum belt that the ceremony called for, Kanen'to:kon was fairly certain that the feeling behind it would matter more. It was a colonist soul being sung to. He would probably not notice the difference. In any case, he was rather proud of the song that he had come up with. It was in his native language rather than the English that the colonists spoke, but the words had needed to be perfect and his English had not been up to the task.

The soft sounds of twigs snapping underneath a person's feet made him look up. From the trees that surrounded the clearing, Aveline emerged slowly. Kanen'to:kon stood up from where he had been poking the fire.

"Hello," she said, smiling awkwardly at him. Her eyes trailed over the beads that he was toying with nervously, making him stop, self-conscious. Clearing his throat, he smiled back, just as nervously.

"Hello," he replied, shifting from one foot to the other. He awkwardly gestured to the fire. "I managed to get the most important parts of the ritual. They are not exact, but they should do..."

He bit his lip to keep from babbling. Aveline was standing in front of the fire now, rubbing one of her arms.

"Thank you," she said, staring into the fire. "I do appreciate even the attempt being made."
Kanen'to:kon didn't know what to say to that, so he just gestured for her to sit down. Folding his own legs underneath himself, he sank to the ground, rubbing the beads himself.

"So," Aveline asked as the silence stretched out between the two of them, "what precisely will the ritual entail? Will I -"

"Oh, it will be me singing for most of it," he said, the words bursting out of him. "I am the akatoni, so all you will have to do is sing back a few lines. Normally there would also be drummers - oh!"

Kanen'to:kon stiffened as he remembered.

Jumping back to his feet, he furiously began to root through his pouches as Aveline watched him.

"I have to -" he stuttered, "before we begin -"

"Have to what?" she asked. Kanen'to:kon looked up at her as he continued to pat himself down. Her eyes were bright with interest, reflecting the lights of the fire.

Finally, his fingers closed around the small pouch that he had traded two hare-skins for. He pulled it out with a triumphant noise and thrust it towards her.

"Here," he said, "tobacco!" At her confused look, he added, "It is part of starting the ritual, since it is sacred."

"I see," she said, tugging the bag open and looking in. The sweet scent of the sacred leaf wafted over to Kanen'to:kon, who began to fiddle with the beads as she stared at it. That particular part of the ritual had been both the easiest to find and the hardest to get. It was grown, apparently, on enormous farms further south, and shipped back up to be sold to many in the towns, but at the same time, it was quite difficult to convince someone to be separated from it. He had been lucky that that old trader had been specifically looking for some hare skins to make into gloves.

Looking up and tugging the bag shut, she nodded solemnly at him.

"You called yourself something," she said, her large brown eyes looking suspiciously shiny in the firelight. "What does 'aka-tonee' mean?"

Kanen'to:kon forced himself to stop fiddling with his hands and look at her.

"It means 'clear-headed'," he explained, feeling oddly reluctant. "I am not the mourner, so it is my duty to guide you through the proper process."

"Proper process?"

He rocked back and forth a little.

"Well," he said after a minute, "grief - my people believe that grief can destroy a person, or a family, or a town, if it is not addressed properly." Looking down at his hands, he added, "So the whole process of the mourning, is supposed to clear away the grief and remind us of our remaining connections to our clan, and our family. To keep us from becoming sick in the head from our sadness. It also placates the spirits of those who have died, so that they do not come back to harm us."

"Harm us?"

Kanen'to:kon blushed and bit his lip. He hadn't meant to mention that part of their beliefs. Back at the village, Ratonnhake:ton had spoken frequently on how the colonists scorned such things,
calling them 'superstitions'. Looking carefully for any signs of scorn on her face, he found none. Only honest interest.

"Cause sickness and injuries."

"I see."

Her eyes drifted downward to the pouch of tobacco again, a contemplative look on her face. The fire popped and crackled.

"I will admit," she said, the words dropping reluctantly from her mouth one at a time like pebbles into a pond, "that I have felt...haunted, by what happened." She closed her eyes and pain flashed across her face. "Watching my father die as I was forced to feed him poison -"

She pressed her lips together and opened her eyes. "The images have stayed with me all of this time. Could I have done more, fought harder -"

Kanen'to:kon interrupted before she could really get going. He knew that blaming oneself was a sign of madness starting in a person's heart.

"You could not have," he said, far more firmly than anything he had said since he had arrived at the homestead. "There was no way that you would not have fought your hardest to save your father, and if you could not have broken free then, then you could not have broken free at all."

He hoped that that was understandable.

"Now," he said, slipping into a sing-song chant, "Hail to our ancestors, who have brought us to this point. Hail to your ancestors, who remind you that now is the time to wipe your eyes and clear your throat. Hail to my ancestors, who have given me this duty to carry out. And Hail both of our ancestors, who have brought us together to cleanse ourselves of the stench of death and sickness, and return the living to the living and the dead to the dead. To continue on with the memories of the dead in our hearts, where they will never be forgotten..."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand that's the end of the settling in arc! Stay tuned for the start of 'Bad Business' this Saturday, where we return to Connor and the McCarthy siblings!
Bad Business Part 1

Connor awoke to find that he was no longer alone in his bed.

Curled up behind him with her red hair tickling his neck and arms wrapping around his chest was Gillian. Her brother Fillian had buried his face into his stomach, with his arms similarly wrapped around Connor's hips. Both were trembling hard enough for him to feel it in his gut.

Connor sighed.

"What is it?" he asked sleepily, not bothering to get up.

The words burst out of Gillian like bullets. "There was a bear onshore his morning! It tried to follow us!" Against his stomach, Connor could feel Fillian nodding frantically in agreement.

He sighed again.

"It was not following us," he mumbled, still half-asleep. "It was most likely trying to catch some fish or animal that was trying to get away."

Neither of the siblings answered; instead, they simply gripped him tighter. Connor sighed again and reluctantly opened his eyes. City children to the bone, the two of them.

The inside of the ship's cabin was still dark, with only a few beams of light managing to trickle in through the porthole in the wall. Around him, he could hear the sounds of the ship: sailors grumbling, sails blowing in the wind and a few early birds singing as they flew overhead. He knew that he would never get back to sleep now. So with only a little grumbling, he sat up.

The Morrigan, captained by the Assassin Hunter Shay Cormac was a small ship, perfect for sailing up the wide rivers that made up the interior of the frontier; unfortunately, that also meant that the cabins were similarly small, barely big enough for one person to stay in let alone three. And yet, that was the situation that Connor found himself in with the McCarthy siblings.

His stomach clenched as he remembered why he was on the ship in the first place. His father hadn't forgiven him over the winter like Connor had hoped he would. All throughout the dark and cold time of the year, his father actions towards him had mimicked the weather. While they continued their lessons together in using the hidden blades and branched out into others like the rope dart, there was none of the warmth that Connor had become accustomed to over the years. Compliments were short and reluctant, criticism harsh and instantaneous. His accomplishments that were usually praised were now regarded with a cool eye and a nod at most where before their had been congratulations and a pat on the back. Connor had not even dared to return to his father's study for their customary evening reading, too afraid of the icy silence that had permeated the house as the days passed. It had almost been a relief when his father had announced that he would be travelling to Mount Johnson to continue his studies, just to get away.

Still, Connor could not entirely bring himself to regret things. He had still saved two lives. Gillian and Fillian had proved themselves to be excellent and clever additions to the Kenway household, hardworking and uncomplaining. They were also his solace during the nights where his father's coldness had become too much, and he had found himself curling up underneath his blankets and shaking as Okwaho slept peacefully at his feet. He was glad that they had been sent along with him as body servants; at the very least, if his Uncle Johnson had been informed of his disobedience, he would still have their company until he was called back to New York.
"Come on," he said, patting Fillian on the back soothingly, "we should go get breakfast. We'll be arriving soon."

The younger boy grumbled, but slid out of the bed and allowed Connor to leave. The younger boy had definitely benefited from being a part of the Kenway household, Connor noted as he slid out of the bed. Rather than the ill-fitting and filthy clothes that he had been wearing when he met Connor, his clothes were now cut for his body rather than that of a man several years older and fatter than him. His cheeks had filled out as well, hiding his cheekbones which had previously been so prominent.

Similar changes had been wrought on his sister. She dressed primly now, in a neat blue dress with a plain white kerchief to cover her shoulders. Whenever she went outside now, she wore a spotless white bonnet and dark leather shoes that Connor had caught her weeping over in private when they had first been handed to her. Her collarbones were now covered in a healthy layer of fat, and you couldn't see her spine whenever she put up her hair into a bun like she was doing now as she scooted to the edge of the bed.

Connor took his cue from her and turned away, slipping on his own clothes and pulling his hair back into a small club at the back of his head, tying it off with a red ribbon.

Outside of the cabin, he could hear the sailors moving around, shifting the cargo that was supposed to reach Mount Johnson today along with him and the siblings. The faintest whiffs of bacon were beginning to waft through the air.

Smoothing his fingers over his blue waistcoat, Connor slipped on his coat and took a deep breath, steeling himself.

"Alright," he said, turning to look at the siblings, "let's go."

Squaring his shoulders, Connor stepped out of the little cabin, the siblings on his heels. Immediately, the noise and smell of the ship's crew at work slapped him in the face like a wet rag. Sailors shouting orders at each other, cursing, idly complaining about having to work, all of these were things that reached his ears as they made their way to the stairs to the upper decks.

"Oi, wouldn't mind having her having a wiggle in my lap," came the mutter from behind him. Gillian hastily took a step closer to him as he walked past the speaker stiffly. As much as he enjoyed sailing with his Uncle Shay (and his father had been rather put out the first time he had taken Connor with him on a ship - mostly he just stared as Connor played with the wheel, occasionally muttering about it 'running in the blood'), it was comments like that that had made his trip up to Mount Johnson not as enjoyable as he had hoped. That and comments about his mother had had his hackles up non-stop. It was only the knowledge that Uncle Shay needed the men to keep the ship sailing that kept him from picking more than one fight.

Well, that and the fact that he didn't dare disappoint his father again by picking fights. Not so soon.

Connor felt cold at the thought of his father's disappointed face. Even as the bright sun began to shine down on him as they reached the top deck, the chill in his bones refused to leave.

His father hadn't just become cool to him over the winter in his manners. The little errands that he had run during previous winters mysteriously dried up. Meals had suffered as well, with his father looking over papers while they ate and disappearing as soon as the meal was over. Connor hadn't dared to follow him for their traditional nightly reading, his nerves failing him every time that he had raised his hand to knock at the door, a book tucked under his arm. He had ended up in his room most of the time, alternately petting Okwaho and staring at the wall.
It had been a very long winter.

A hand clamped down on Connor's shoulder, jerking him out of his dark thoughts. Automatically tensing, he reached up to break the fingers of whoever had grabbed him so suddenly, only to be stopped by another hand grabbing his hand and squeezing.

"Hey now," Uncle Shay said, his brogue as thick as ever, "no breaking the captain's fingers." Despite his stern words, though, his eyes were amused as Connor felt his cheeks heat.

"Sorry," Connor said, ducking his head. Uncle Shay let go of his hand with a chuckle.

"Don't worry about it," he said with a friendly nod, "it's a good reflex to have, believe me. It'll save your life some day. You two," he said, jerking his chin towards the siblings, "should get on acquiring yourselves a similar set of reflexes if you plan on staying so close with Connor here. Maybe that will keep you from getting into so much trouble now, hmm?"

Gillian turned a brilliant scarlet that clashed with her hair at the older man's words. Fillian, however, just nodded wildly in agreement.

"I know," he said, his eyes wide and sincere. "If I had been like Mister Connor back when me and Gillian were in trouble, I would have never let her get captured! I would have kicked all their asses!"

Connor squirmed as the younger boy's eyes, shining with hero worship, turned towards him. He had seemed to like Connor when he had been hired as a servant by his father, but over the winter, Connor had talked to him a lot in his loneliness, telling him stories of how he was trained and what it was like at his home village. The boy had gulped down his every word, it seemed, and even before the first signs of the snow melting had come along, he had taken to following Connor around during his free time to watch him, as if he was expecting him to suddenly do tricks. Really, it was almost flattering at times, but Connor didn't feel very much like a hero. He liked to think that he had only done what anyone else had done.

He opened his mouth to tell Fillian as much when a loud guffaw from behind him made his jaw click shut. Turning, he saw Uncle Shay covering his mouth, his eyes crinkled in amusement as he looked at the little blond-haired boy.

"I see what your father meant," he said, flashing a set of still-white teeth.

Connor's head snapped around as he promptly forgot his embarrassment. "My father?" he asked, taking a step closer to the older man. "He said something to you about me?"

Uncle Shay suddenly looked very shifty.

"Oh, well," he said hastily, looking around the deck, "It looks like I had better get back to the wheel. We're rather close to Mount Johnson now, anyways." He turned began to walk away very quickly, almost on the verge of jogging.

"Wait!" called Connor, trying to grab a handful of the older man's coat. However, the Templar was an old hand at avoiding getting caught. He ducked and almost seemed to slide away from Connor's grasping hands, staying just out of his reach without even looking like he was trying. Connor was left standing in the middle of the ships deck with empty hands.

He pressed his lips together until it hurt as his gut churned. His father had been talking to other people about him?
Gillian's hand was gentle as she settled it on his trembling shoulders. He turned to look at her. Her face was sympathetic, and she patted his shoulder gently.

"We should probably get our things ready if we're nearly there," she said. "We'll be below decks if you need us." Turning to go back down the stairs into the hold, she snaked out a pale arm to snag Fillian as he stared at the men climbing the riggings above them with his mouth open. Dragging him by his collar, she ignored his protests as they went back down into the hold.

For a moment, Connor simply stood on the deck, clenching and unclenching his hands in frustration. Sailors walked around him, going about their business oblivious to the anger, sadness and confusion mixing together in his stomach.

His father had been talking to his subordinates about him. How many of the men that passed through his home knew about his father's disappointment in him? How many of those men were on Uncle Shay's ship? Anxiety began to braid knots in his chest. Did Uncle William know about him and the McCarthys as well? Did everyone know of how he had lost the his father's trust?

For one wild moment, he considered marching over to where Uncle Shay was shouting orders in his thick brogue from the ship's wheel and demanding answers. It was only a moment, though, quickly banished. The older man had not been able to serve so highly in the Templar Order for so many years to be easily swayed by his words. And judging by his reaction, he had probably been specifically ordered not to tell Connor anything.

Grinding his teeth, he instead turned on his heel and began to march towards bowsprit. Fine, if no one trusted him enough to tell him why he was being sent to Mount Johnson, then he would just have to prove himself again, no matter how long it took.

They had to start trusting him again eventually, surely?

By the time dinner rolled around at Mount Johnson, though, Connor was not so sure that that was the case.

Everywhere he looked, it seemed that people were pointing at him and whispering to each other. Even the servants and mercenaries seemed to know more of what was going on than he did. It was making him feel as if he had a large target painted on his back everywhere he went, and that someone was taking aim.

So by the time that the sun had gone down and they were sitting down for supper, Connor was sure that he resembled a twitchy mess. It hadn't helped that Uncle William had essentially ignored him after a quick greeting and a brief explanation that his wife and children were visiting her relatives down at the docks of Johnstown. With his books and such still packed away in his trunk, his usual friends in Uncle William's wife and children gone for several months visiting family and the McCarthy's whisked away to be instructed on their duties in the house while they were staying with Connor, he had had nothing to distract him from the poisonous thoughts that circled in his head like sharks.

Why had his father sent him here? Connor hadn't known what to expect when he was summoned from his lessons with his history tutor two weeks ago to talk with his father in his study. His gut had been churning, he remembered, but his father hadn't even bothered to look up at him as he tonelessly informed him that he would be going up to Johnstown to learn from his Uncle William. His face had been expressionless, even slightly bored. He hadn't bothered to explain why he had seemingly suddenly decided this; just told Connor to pack his trunk for a long visit, and that Uncle Shay would be taking him up there.
And Uncle Shay's words that morning just added more questions. What had his father been talking to the Templars about him for? What had he said that had made the reactions of the McCarthy siblings to Uncle Shay's words so amusing to the man?

Staring down at the half-eaten chicken and squash on his plate, Connor struggled to keep a hold of his appetite and finish his dinner. His Uncle William, however, had had no such problems. The soft clink of the older man's cutlery being placed down on the plate caused Connor to look up from his own messy plate of now-cold food to see him wiping his mouth clean with a napkin.

"So, lad," he said, putting the napkin down on the plate, "I take it you had a good trip up here?"

Connor shyly nodded, still playing with his food. "Yes," he said, "it was a bit cramped, but it was nice to be on a boat again."

"I see, I see," the man said, looking distant. He rapped his fingers along the table. "Tell me, did your father tell you why you were being sent up here?"

Biting the inside of his cheek, Connor shook his head, keeping a wary eye on the older man. He hummed to himself, his lips twisting briefly into an annoyed moue. "Well then," he said, sounding tired, "I suppose it is my duty to let you know why you will be staying with me for the next year."

Connor couldn't help but let his eyebrows shoot up. "The next year?" he said. His father hadn't given him any inclination that he was sending him up here for more than a few months!

"Aye," the man said, nodding. "You're father's concerned about your future, and wants you to have some more experience in certain areas before he really introduces you to the Order. I'm supposed to be helping you with that."

Still reeling from the reveal that he would be spending a fully year away from home, Conner just nodded in a daze.

"For starters, he wants you to start building up your own finances, since there could be trouble with leaving his own business to you." He paused as Connor pressed his lips together at the reminder of his status in colonial society. His eyes softened in sympathy. "I know, lad, it's an ugly thing, and you'd rather be a doctor, but at the same time it's necessary. He's asked me to help introduce you to some possible contacts."

Connor looked back down at his plate. He hadn't been aware that his little dream had been common knowledge amongst the members of the Templar Inner Circle. Though he supposed that devouring every text on inoculation against smallpox after having the treatment done to himself as a child hadn't been exactly subtle. Neither had peppering Church with questions about his practice, as useless as that had turned out to be.

"I suppose that if I become rich enough, I will be able to help my people more," he muttered, "along with helping myself." He supposed that he would be able to just afford it so that he could send doctors out to inoculate his people, rather than doing it all by himself.

Across from him, Uncle William smiled, looking a little relieved at his lack of protest.

"Exactly," he said. "But business is not the only reason we're to spend time together; your father's identified a few areas where you could be of great use to the Order in the future, and wants me to give you a helping hand in developing your talents in those areas, so to speak."

Drawing himself out of his morose thoughts of his people dying from infected blankets, Connor perked up a little. Developing his talents? His father had been talking about how he could help the
Order in the future? A small bit of warmth filled his stomach at the thought. His father hadn't given up on him, then.

"For starters, he has noticed that you seemingly have a knack for inspiring others to follow you; a certain charisma, if you will." Tapping his fingers on the table, he nodded at the look of confusion on Connor's face. "Like with those servants of yours; he said that you getting them to stick their necks out for you so soon after meeting you was what tipped him off."

Oh. Connor blinked. He hadn't realized that his father had been so impressed by that. Well, he had allowed them to stay and everything after Gillian's speech, but he hadn't said anything to anyone after he had hired them. In fact, he had basically ignored them like he did every servant that wasn't Mrs. Potts the housekeeper for the entire winter before assigning them to Connor as personal servants for this trip. Uncle William smiled wryly at the look of confusion on his face.

"Come now, lad," he said jovially, "you had met them then what, a few hours ago? And they were willing to stand up to your father to defend you? That's a rare talent, inspiring that sort of loyalty so quickly."

Connor squirmed. "Thank you," he said softly, feeling his cheeks burn, "but I had just saved their lives."

Uncle William waved a hand like he was brushing his concerns away. "Saving their lives or no, it's still quite impressive. And in any case, it's given your father the idea of having you trained as more than an Assassin Hunter." The amusement on his face quickly fell away, like a bolt of cloth falling to the ground after being dropped. "You see, he wants you to be trained as a replacement for me."

It took a moment for what he had said to percolate through Connor's head. Once it did though, the younger man stiffened.

"I - me - a replacement for you!" he stammered, his eyes widening. Uncle William solemnly nodded.

"Yes," he said, "and I agree with his reasoning on this. For one," he said, holding up a finger, "I am not a young man anymore. I was already middle-aged when I first met your father, and quite frankly it would not be unusual for me to die in the next decade. Secondly, there aren't many in the Order as it is who would be capable of properly negotiating with the Natives of this land. My own credibility with them was damaged by Stanwix, and it's been tainting every interaction with them since."

He looked seriously over his fingers at Connor. "Thirdly, no matter what, I am a white colonist. That has never been forgotten by the natives, even when we had an excellent relationship."

Connor wrinkled his brow. "You think that they will be more willing to listen to one of their own, then."

Uncle William nodded. "Yes," he said heavily. "Your people, no matter what most of colonist society says, are a powerful faction on the frontier. The Order does not want to face them as an enemy; in fact, your father has been looking to recruit amongst them. In that, your example will be crucial." He paused, and looked Connor in the eye. "And frankly, with enough money and the support of the Order, we'd be better able to protect them from the encroachment of the colonists."

Connor bit the inside of his cheek again.

"So, I could save my people," he said, "negotiate between the colonists and them, keep them from
fighting."

"Exactly," Uncle William said. "Far too much blood has already been spilled between our two peoples, and the Order and your father is heartily sick of it."

"I see," Connor said. He could feel a bit of excitement building within him. Yes, yes, this could work he knew. With enough wealth and the Order behind him, colonist society wouldn't dare ignore him! He could keep his people safe from the predations of the white man.

"Thank you for explaining this to me," he said, turning back to the older man. "I look forward to learning all that you have to teach me."

Uncle William smiled avuncularly at him.
Of course, for all that Uncle William had wanted to get Connor started on meeting people right away, it did not work out that way. Several things popped up almost the next morning; little things that while easy to solve, were time consuming, involved and numerous. Except for one problem that was rather large, and named Matthew Taylor.

Leaning up against a tree with his arms crossed across his beefy chest, the sweaty and ill-dressed man turned his head to spit on the ground.

"Like I said, Master Johnson," he said, widening his eyes in a failed attempt to look innocent, "I ain't trying to make things difficult for you. I like you; I'm just sayin' that its been awhile since us men have seen a pretty woman. You can hardly blame us for lettin' our interest be known by the pretty pieces that walk on by."

Connor curled his lip in contempt. Uncle William's face was as smooth and still as a stone.

"On the contrary, Mister Taylor," he said, disdain dripping from every word, "when they start complaining about being harassed by you and your friends, I certainly can and will blame you. Especially when the complainer is the servant of a guest of honor."

Taylor mock-frowned and furrowed his brow, reaching up to scratch at his filthy-looking jaw. "Hmm," he said, "the servant of a guest of honor, eh? I can't say that I remember any guests of honor or their servants hanging around. Just a bit walking around with some great tits nearly hangin' out."

Only a small, sharp gesture kept Connor from surging forward and teaching the lazy thug in front of them a lesson in respect. When Gillian had first come back to the house after fetching something from one of the guest houses with her face pale with red spots high on her cheeks, he had immediately realized that something was wrong. It had taken both him and Fillian working together to get her to admit to some of the awful things that Taylor and his men had said to her as she walked past, and memories of his father's disappointment to keep him from immediately going out to beat some respect into the man.

But no, he had been good. Instead of taking things into his own hands, he had informed Uncle William of how Gillian hadn't felt safe due to the men, and he had promised to speak to the mercenaries. But the man's obstinancy! Claiming that Gillian had been running around and inviting such comments! Looking up at the narrowed eyes of his honorary uncle, he was a little relieved to see that he seemed equally as outraged as Connor felt at the man's insinuations.

"Mister Taylor," Uncle William growled, "do not think that you are not replaceable. This is not the first complaint that I have gotten about the behaviour of you and your men. If I get another, you will be replaced. Am I understood?"

Taylor scowled.

"Am. I. Understood?"

Growling, he pushed himself off the tree and brushed himself off. "Fine," he snapped, picking up the rifle that had been leaning up against the tree beside him, "no more compliments, I got it." He stalked off, his back stiff and shoulders squared.

Uncle William sighed and rubbed his forehead.
"I'm terrible sorry about that, lad," he said, turning to look at Connor wearily. "How to deal with terrible employees was not the first lesson I wanted to give you."

Connor shrugged and crossed his arms, trying not to look too upset. "It is alright," he replied, looking after the unpleasant man. "I would have to learn eventually, anyway."

Uncle William sighed again. "Perhaps," he said, sounding upset. "In any case, that's eaten up a fair bit of my time today. I'm sorry, but I have to go out again. Will you be able to entertain yourself?"

"Yes," Connor said, thinking of the rope darts sitting on top of his bed.

For a moment, the older man paused, seeming about to say something else. Then he shook his head. "I will be back in time for supper," he said, "and after that we will hopefully go over proper book-keeping."

Connor watched for a moment as he strode off, heading towards the stables. So far, this little trip was turning into an exercise in frustration rather than one in education.

Shaking his head, he went to fetch the rope-darts for practice.

Breathing in the clean air of the forest surrounding Mount Johnson, Connor jumped from tree branch to tree branch with childish glee. Out here in the forest, without the restricting clothes and manners of the colonists, he felt like he could finally breathe.

Up ahead, the branch that he was running along ended. Down below, he knew, was a pile of branches and leaves. So without a thought, he jumped into the air, stretching his arms out like an eagle's wings and for one sweet moment, he felt as if he was truly flying.

Then a shot rang out through the air. Connor half-twisted in mid-air and very nearly landed incorrectly, only just managing to keep from breaking anything. Loud crashing followed the sound of the shot, and Connor rolled out of the pile of leaves, already swinging the rope dart to get it ready to fly.

Looking around, nothing immediately presented itself as an enemy. The forest was still, the shot having scared away most of the wildlife. His heart thundering in his ears, Connor's gaze darted around the clearing that he was in, breathing harshly and looking for any sign of movement. This close to Uncle William's land, there shouldn't be any hunters. That meant that it was most likely a poacher, looking to make a few extra pounds on the side and willing to fight to keep the source of their money a secret.

A bush rustled behind him. Connor moved before any thought had time to run through his head and let the rope dart fly towards the shaking bush.

"Oi!" came the young, high-pitched cry.

Halfway through the followup to launch himself towards the business end of the weapon, Connor wasn't able to stop himself from dashing over to the bush with his hunting knife already in his hand. He did, however, manage to keep from stabbing the owner of the cry in the face as he threw up his arms up to defend himself.

He was young. That was the first thought to go through his head. Looking down on the chubby-cheeked and slightly grimy face of the boy beneath him, his blue eyes wide and wet with terror, the boy was at most the same age as Connor; possibly younger, as the native boy was willing to admit that he could pass for a man several years older than he actually was.
The boy's throat bobbed as he swallowed nervously, his eyes sliding over to look at the blade of the rope dart that was sunk up to its hilt beside his face.

"Please, sir," the boy begged, his eyes locked upon the sharp blade still perilously close to his head, "whatever I have done to offend you, I swear I was not aware of it."

Realizing just how frightening he must seem, Connor rocked back on his heels. With a short yank, he pulled the rope dart out of the ground that it had landed in and coiled it around his arm. He didn't put his knife away though; a fair face did not mean a fair heart, after all.

His arms trembling, the boy slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position, his wide, frightened eyes reminding Connor of a deer despite their pale colour. Looking past the boy, Connor spotted why there had been the sound of a gunshot. A deer lay on the ground, its eyes glossy and blank in death. Its pelt was glossy as well; even to his relatively inexperienced eyes, Connor knew that such a fur would catch a fine price when traded.

Looking back down at the boy, Connor realized that he was wearing a large pack on his back. Knives dangled from his belt, dragging in the soft dirt of the forest floor, and just a few feet away, clearly having fallen as he was knocked down, lay a wide-brimmed hat, one side sloppily pinned up with what looked like a brass pin.

"This is William Johnson's land," Connor said. "He does not like people hunting this close to his home."

The boy's tanned cheeks paled. "I-I am sorry, sir, I swear I didn't know that I was trespassing," he babbled, "I was just trying to get a jump on the other fur traders, they were waiting until the weather warmed up to go out hunting and they're a lot older than me and if I don't get her first they'll stake out all the good places and keep me from getting anything and then I'll have to go home and my brothers will make fun of me-"

Connor cut off what would have no doubt been a very long babbled explanation with a sharp hand gesture. The boy's mouth shut with an audible click.

"What is your name?"

"Clipper, sir, Clipper Wilkinson."

"Alright, Clipper," Connor said, climbing to his feet, "you say you did not know that you were trespassing?"

Still on the ground, the newly-named Clipper nodded frantically. "I swear that's the truth, sir," he said earnestly, "I didn't mean to steal anything from anyone."

Connor frowned. "Why are you so close to Johnstown, then?" he asked, arching a brow. "Game is far more plentiful deeper into the frontier."

Clipper flushed. Climbing to his feet, he brushed the dirt off his clothes as best he could. "Er, well, sir," he hemmed and hawed, staring at his feet "the thing is - I don't suppose you've heard the rumours, of what's going on out there?" He looked up at Connor, biting his lip.

Connor narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, toying with one end of the rope dart. "I have been wintering in New York these past months. Enlighten me."

The boy gnawed his lower lip and shifted from one foot to the other, his eyes bouncing between his too-big battered leather boots and Connor's face. After a few seconds, he swallowed again.
"People," he started, and then hesitated. "People are disappearing, out there. Not just us fur-traders, either, sir," he said, stopping Connor's first comment in its tracks. "Farmers, metal-workers. I even heard an entire town disappeared, nothing but blood and still-burning fires! And the rumour going around is that its not Indians doing it, despite what some people are saying! Apparently their villages are getting hit hard as well. And, well, when I heard that..." the boy shrugged and looked up at Connor. "When I heard that, I thought, what's my chances, then, alone, out there?"

Connor had to struggle to keep his face still. The moment that Clipper had started to talk about towns disappearing, his mind skipped back to his own village. That story sounded sickeningly familiar. The other tribe that had trickled in at the beginning of the previous summer, begging for shelter under the banner of being part of the Haudenosaunee, they had spoken of such things. People disappearing, towns burning. But they had carried tales of the culprits, unlike, it seemed, Clipper's sources did.

White men. With lots of guns. Raving and screaming, trying to find something out there and convinced that anyone they found was hiding it and needed to be tortured so that they'd tell the truth. Connor, with his interest in healing the sick, had spied on some of the efforts made to heal those that had managed to escape. There hadn't been many. Their injuries had explained why.

Burns. Broken bones. Open wounds that were red and infected by the time that the survivors had managed to make their way to the village. All of them clearly inflicted to cause the maximum amount of pain. Even with the knowledge of violence that his training under his father had given him, he had found the injuries nauseating.

Holding up a hand, he stopped Clipper before he could launch into another stream of babbling. "I believe you," he said, meeting the boy's pale eyes with his own dark ones. Immediately, his shoulders slumped in relief. "But," Connor continued, "the fact still remains that you were trespassing on Mr. Johnson's land."

His cheeks flushed and he balled up his hands into fists in front of his chest. "I swear, sir, I did not mean to do so!" he cried.

Connor held up his hand again to stop him.

"And I believe you in that as well," he said gently, stopping the boy's face from getting any redder. "But the fact remains that if anyone else had found you out here -" especially Matthew Taylor, he thought grimly, "- they would not have been so understanding of your circumstances."

Clipper looked thoughtful, the stain fading from his cheeks. "So what do you suggest I do then," he asked, hastily adding, "sir?"

Connor blinked and furrowed his brow. From the other boy's worry about going out deeper into the frontier, he didn't want to just tell him to leave. Perhaps -

"Come with me," he said, "back to Mount Johnson. He is a reasonable man; if you just explain your worries, I am sure that he will allow you to continue your activities on his land for a cut of your profits."

Clipper looked utterly relieved. Smiling, he nodded in agreement. "Sure thing!" he said, "Just let me get the hide of this deer and I'll come along with you."

Turning, he squatted down beside the dead animal and pulled his knife from his belt. Walking closer, Connor got a better look at the injury that had taken the deer down.
"That's quite a shot," he murmured, gesturing at the small bullet-hole in the deer's head when Clipper looked up questioningly. The other boy beamed.

"Aye," he said happily, "figured that that part of the pelt isn't usually sold, so it was safe to shoot it there."

"Not many would be able to make that shot."

"Many aren't me." The boy's skinny chest puffed out, and he thumped it with one bloody hand. "I can make nine out of ten shots, and the tenth shot's a misfire."

Connor's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. If Clipper was telling the truth, that was most impressive, and he said so. The boy blushed again. "Aw, it ain't nothing much," he said, finishing the skinning of the deer with quick, economical movements. "All my family can do it. Nothing else to do out in the country but sharpen your shooting and make moonshine, and I can't hold my liquor very well anyways." Shrugging his pack off, he rolled the hide up and secured it to the top.

After he had put it back on, he got to his feet, brushing a little dirt off of his knees. "Alright," he said, sticking his thumbs under the pack's straps and grinning, "which way to Master Johnson?"

The walk back to Mount Johnson was actually quite pleasant. Clipper, even with his chatter, was good company, asking about his name and why he was visiting Mount Johnson. At first, Connor had replied warily, aware from his father's many lectures on his too-trusting nature that such things often lead to late-night attacks, but Clipper didn't seem to have a bone of guile in his body. Even when he realized that Connor was half-native, he only apologized for mispronouncing his native name.

He was quite funny too, with his stories of growing up with several brothers and the shenanigans that they got up to, living out in the bush. Connor had only just caught his breath from laughing about his story of the first time he had gotten drunk when they broke through the treeline and were spotted by Uncle William.

"Ah, Connor," the older man yelled, raising his arm. Connor cheerfully waved back.

"Is that him?" Clipper asked from beside him. Looking over, Connor saw that the good cheer that had been on his face just a moment ago had faded, leaving him pale and thin-lipped. Lowering his arm, Connor nodded and tried to flash him a reassuring smile.

"It will be alright," he said quietly as they walked over to the older man, "he is reasonable; once you explain that you did not know that you had crossed over onto his land, I'm sure that he will be open to the solution that we came up with."

Clipper didn't look as soothed as he had hoped. Steeling himself, Connor lifted up a hand and patted him on the shoulder. Despite living amongst the colonists and their grabby hands for years, he still didn't like how much they expected him to touch them and be touched in return. However, Clipper looked terrified enough for Connor to make the effort. He seemed to appreciate it too, if the grateful look that he shot him meant anything.

This close to Uncle William, though, Connor noticed that he wasn't alone. The back door of the main house was open, leading into the darkened interior, and someone was standing there, leaning against the doorframe. Turning, Uncle William shook the person's hand, and this close, Connor felt a shock of recognition at the cowrie-shell band that adorned the man's wrist.

"Uncle!" he called out in his native language, a broad grin crossing his face. The older native
stepped out of the shadows, smiling back at him as he broke into a trotting run.

Uncle Otetieni caught him as he threw himself into the older man's arms and hugged him tightly, patting Connor's back. Tucking his chin over his maternal uncle's shoulder, he wrapped his arms around the other man's abdomen and squeezed back.

He had not expected to see his uncle here! When he had left his village, he had resigned himself to only the occasional visit once in a while, and never for very long, so to see a family member this far from home was a very nice surprise.

Pulling back reluctantly, he beamed up at his uncle. The older man was dressed in what Connor recognized as his 'talking to white men' clothes; a white linen shirt, covered with an embroidered cloak edged with feathers and deerskin moccassins and trousers that had a knife and tomahawk dangling from them.

Patting him on the head, Uncle Otetieni smiled back down at him. "Kwhe, Ratonhnhake:ton," he said, "how have you been?"

"Well, uncle," he replied, "Uncle William has been helping to teach me about running a business." A thought struck him then, and he stepped back slightly. "Why are you here, Uncle? Has something happened to the village?"

Uncle Otetieni's face tensed for a moment before all emotion was wiped from it.

"No," he said, "nothing has happened. I am here to make sure that nothing continues to happen, in fact."

"What Sachem Otetieni means," Uncle William broke in, "is that he was just discussing buying a large shipment of weapons through me. We were just discussing payment terms, in fact."

"Weapons?"

Connor couldn't help but tense. Clipper's words of what was going on in the frontier rudely pushed themselves to the front of his mind. Had things gotten worse over the winter? He tried to communicate his questions to Uncle Otetieni with a look.

The man's face was worryingly still. Skipping his eyes along the man's body, Connor only just caught the small motion that he was making with his hand, a clear sign for 'later'. Remembering the conversation that they had had the previous autumn, he couldn't help but wonder if he should have disobeyed his request not to tell his father's friends about the troubles out in the Frontier. Biting his lip, he forced himself to keep any of his worry from showing on his face and turned back to his other uncle.

"What will the payment terms be, then?" he asked, not failing to notice the man's interested look that he was shooting at the two of them. To his credit, he too seemed to force his interest back. Focusing on Connor, he smiled.

"I'm glad you asked, lad," he said, "I was actually hoping that you'd return soon. What we've worked out here is a set of payment installments..."
Bad Business Part 3

Connor whistled as he poked his finger through the bullseye of the target.

"Amazing," he said, not even exaggerating, "I did not actually think that you would be able to hit it so accurately from so far away."

Clipper grinned and shouldered his rifle. "If that's the case," he said, "I should have made a bet with you."

Connor returned the grin and stood up from his crouch. Standing on the beach by the docks, the sun shone down on them pleasantly, warming up what was otherwise a rather cool spring day. After Clipper had explained himself to Uncle William, he had ended up hanging around Mount Johnson quite a bit, and the two of them had struck up a fast friendship based around weaponry.

"Now," Connor said, lifting up his own rifle to his shoulder, "what am I doing wrong?"

Weaponry, and fighting.

Clipper leaned against his gun and hummed to himself, looking Connor up and down while stroking his chin. "We-ell," he drawled, squinting slightly, "your form seems to be okay; kind of stiff, to be honest, but it does the job. Try shooting something - that may give me a better idea."

Reaching out, he took the cloth with the sloppily painted cloth and re-affixed it to the bale of hay that he had been shooting at.

Putting the gun back down, Connor began to walk back to where they had been standing in the first place while shooting. He knew that he was very talented at fighting; some would say frighteningly so. But Connor was not so good that he refused to face up to his weaker sides, and shooting was one of those areas.

His father had taught him close to everything that he knew about fighting. With his training, Connor felt confident in saying that he was a match for any soldier or officer that he was likely to meet when he began to work within the Order. But he had never quite gotten the hang of using rifles. Bows, he excelled with; his hunting with his village during the summers of his childhood had paid off and given him an excellent aim in general. The same could be said of his prowess with throwing knives and his tomahawk. But guns were different. They had a kick to them that he never seemed to properly brace for, and that always, it seemed, threw his aim off.

Personally, Connor was sure it was simply a matter of not being able to practice regularly. After all, even if he and his father did not live right in the most densely populated part of New York, it still was not easy to justify practicing shooting weapons at all hours to the neighbours. Not to mention, it was not always practical to practice shooting, period. If there was not a blizzard, there was inevitably people around who were vulnerable to stray bullets. And his father did not need the sort of scrutiny that several dead bodies would bring.

So regretfully, Connor's gunplay had been neglected, until he had found out that Clipper was not exaggerating about his prowess with the rifle.

Clipper bounced up from where he had been fiddling with the ropes to make sure the sloppily-painted target was secure and trotted up to beside him, his prized gun tucked under one arm.

"Alright," he said, bouncing slightly, "shoot!"

With one smooth motion, Connor lifted the but of the gun to his shoulder, aimed and fired. The
roar of the shot was incredibly loud in his ears, and he closed his eyes against the smoke as the gun jerked wildly in his hands. Beside him, Clipper was quiet. Opening his eyes, he glanced beside him to see the other boy standing there, no longer bouncing and with an odd expression on his face.

For one wild moment, Connor was sure that he had somehow managed to shoot him. Then he moved, placing a hand over his mouth and furrowing his brow. "Do it again, sir?" he asked, sounding almost distracted. "I need to make sure that that wasn't a fluke."

Obligingly, Connor reloaded the gun and took aim again. Staring down the metal barrel of the weapon, its metal warm underneath his fingers from use, he took a breath and pulled the trigger again.

"Yeah," Clipper said as his ears stopped ringing, "I see where you're going wrong."

All of the nervousness and awe that had seemed to be a part of his normal character melted away as he stepped forward. Leaning his gun against the cliff face and reaching out, he began to correct Connor's stance with small taps and pushes, much like how his father had when Connor had just begun to learn how to fight.

"Right," he said, "near as I can tell, you have three problems. They're not unusual; pretty normal with novices." Connor nodded, suppressing his small twitch at being so easily touched. He had been the one to ask for this, after all.

"First of all," he said, crouching down and placing his hands on Connor's thighs, "you aren't bracing enough when you start to shoot. That means that you aren't controlling the kick from your weapon. And that means," he said sternly, looking up at Connor, "your shots will always go wide. Now that might count when you're in a regiment with a bunch of other guys shooting along with you, but the way you've been talking, whatever you're being taught to do probably has you alone a lot of the time. So every shot is going to have to count."

"Second is your breathing. You gotta control your breathing when shooting; every breath moves the barrel just a little. That little, though, becomes a lot at a distance." Touching his own chest, he said, "I shoot as soon as I breathe out; there's like a pause there, where your gun isn't moving at all, and it's when it's easiest to track and hit the target."

"I see," Connor said, "so it is like watching your breathing while in a swordfight so that you do not get tired as quickly as you usually do."

Clipper flushed a little and shrugged, scratching his cheek. "Don't know much about sword-fighting," he admitted, "but I guess it makes sense. Keeps you properly receptive and your eyes clear, that's all that I know."

"What is the third thing?" Connor asked. Clipper stood up and brushed himself off.

"Well," he said slowly, "it seems like a little thing, I know, but -" he reached out and put his hand over Connor's trigger finger. "You gotta squeeze the trigger, not pull it," he said seriously. Connor blinked in confusion.

"I do not see the difference," he admitted.

Clipper bit his lip. "It comes back to keeping steady aim," he said, shifting his position so that he could fit his finger through the trigger guard with Connor's. "When you pull a trigger, the barrel jerks a little. But squeezing it -"

Connor's eyes lit up with understanding. "Squeezing it means that it is not such a jerky motion," he
finished, "and so my aim remains steady." He grinned at Clipper. "Thank you," he said, "I see what you mean."

Clipper blushed and stepped back. "Aw, it was nothing," he said modestly, "just little mistakes that mostly everyone makes."

Glancing up at the sky, Connor made a note of the time. "Little mistakes become bad habits," he replied easily, "and so are best corrected while still little mistakes." Looking back down, he asked, "It is almost time for tea; would you like to join me?"

"Ah, well," Clipper said, glancing up at the sky himself, "I really should start getting ready for dusk hunting."

Connor smiled. He and the boy were the same in that respect; they both had a strong work ethic.

"Then take it with you," he offered. "It does not have to be a fancy meal. We have some dried apples still, and some cheese and bread. It would be no trouble to give you some to take for while you set up traps."

Clipper's stomach growling capped off Connor's argument quite nicely. The boy flushed and scratched his cheek. "Well, if it's not too much trouble," he said, picking up his gun from where it had been resting.

Connor chuckled and swung his own gun up to rest on his shoulder. "Come along then," he said, starting up the hill to the main house, "I would not wish to keep you from your business."

They strolled up the hill together, chatting and laughing with each other. The leaves on the trees were rapidly blooming from the small green buds that they had been when Connor had arrived, and they shaded the path quite nicely. All around them were the sounds of the land waking up; squirrels chattering and birds singing, animals crashing through the underbrush in search of food. For the first time in a while, Connor felt at peace.

Matthew Taylor the mercenary's harsh voice put an end to that.

"Oi, boy!" came his sneering tones. Connor looked up, stopping in mid-conversation about the best ways to skin a beaver and frowned. The older, slightly paunchy man was leaning on his musket at the top of the hill, smirking and scratching at his unshaven face.

"Yes, Mister Taylor?" Connor asked, just barely keeping his disdain for the man out of his voice. The man jerked his head back towards the main house, his smirk unwavering. "Master Johnson wants to talk to you," he said.

The man jerked his head back towards the main house, his smirk unwavering. "Master Johnson wants to talk to you," he said.

"I see," Connor replied, keeping his pace steady. Some part of him revolted at the idea of hurrying because of something Taylor had said to him. The man was an utter ass, more concerned with his genitals' needs than what he had been hired for, and he had been harassing Gillian and the other female servants whenever they came near enough to him. His little comments to his followers about monkeys whenever he saw Connor were revolting as well. He honestly wondered how the man had been hired in the first place with the contempt he showed for everyone not like him.

Clipper's eyes were darting between the two of them. As they got closer to Taylor, the older man stopped leaning on his musket and straightened up, addressing Clipper.

"So," he asked, "what precisely were you doing down there?"
Clipper shot a look at Connor. Narrowing his eyes, Connor nodded at him slightly, giving him permission to tell the man what had been going on. Turning, Clipper stuck out his chin and and narrowed his eyes.

"We were practicing shooting," he said. His eyes gleamed with a challenge that was offset by his still-chubby face.

Taylor guffawed.

Grabbing Clipper's wrist, Connor dragged the younger boy past the laughing man, his face burning. He didn't stop even as Clipper stumbled, unable to keep up with his longer strides, instead dragging him along until they finally reached the door of the house and and stormed in. Slamming the door shut behind him, Connor paused with his hand on the doorknob and pressed his forehead to the cool wood.

Why had the man's laughter affected him so much? Such things had happened quite often over the years, with fools and such either taunting him after finding out that he was learning or insinuating that he was too dumb to know such things in the first place. His father had never stood for such things within his hearing, often having the people bodily thrown out of the house whenever they were stupid enough to express such beliefs directly to him. But even with such examples, people had still talked, and Connor had learned to put on a mask of cool indifference to such words as a very young child.

So why had this particular bout of laughter rattled him so badly?

A gentle hand on his shoulder made him look to see Clipper looking sympathetic.

"It's okay, sir," he said loyally, "that man's a fool and everyone knows it."

Connor pressed his lips together and looked away. Humiliation at his reaction and joy at Clipper's friendship warred in his chest and made his stomach churn, destroying his appetite. As much as he wanted to just go upstairs and sulk in his room, though, Clipper's stomach was growling again, and he had offered him food before he slipped back into the forest to check his traps.

"Thank you, Clipper," he said, standing up straight and placing his hand over the other boy's.

"Anytime, sir," he replied, smiling shyly up at Connor.

They then headed towards the kitchen in a friendly silence. The halls of Mount Johnson were very well made. Decorated with a mixture of Uncle William's English furniture and his wife's traditional art, the walls gave off a feeling of harmony between the two cultures that Connor wished was more widespread. Everything was clean and swept, and the boards underneath their feet didn't squeak like the ones in Connor's father's house did by design.

This was probably why they were able to surprise Gillian as she sat by the fireplace in the kitchen, peering closely over a book.

For a moment, the three of them just stared at each other. Clipper uncomprehending, Connor confused and Gillian paling. Then they burst into a flurry of action.

"Wait!" Connor cried as Gillian snapped the book shut and dove to hide it in the basket of sewing that sat beside her. Crossing the kitchen quickly, he grabbed her wrist before she could flee. "What was that book?"

The only colour in her face was the two spots of red high on her cheeks. Her lips, pressed so tightly
together that they were bloodless, barely moved as she stared at her feet and mumbled something. Connor cocked his head.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

Gillian sucked in a breath. "I said," she said, "that it's a Latin grammar book. Someone threw it out in New York, so I took it. I've been reading it ever since."

Connor blinked in confusion. Was that it?

"Why were you trying to hide it, then?" he asked, honestly confused.

She squirmed slightly in his grip, her eyes darting around and biting her lower lip. "You know that I'm grateful to you and your father, right?" she asked, sounding oddly anxious.

"I-I assumed so," Connor replied.

"Well," she said, "the thing is, I -" she paused and chewed on her lip again for a moment. "I don't want to be your maid forever, though."

Connor blinked.

"It does mean a lot that you were willing to take me and my brother in even after we gave you so much trouble," she said in a rush, nearly tripping over her words, "but I don't want to be reliant on another person for the rest of my life. I want to have my own home and my own money -"

It clicked in Connor's head what she was saying.

"You wish to be of independent means," he said with certainty.

Gillian didn't relax under his hand.

"Yes."

"I see." Connor carefully let go of her arm and stepped back. "So you are studying Latin -"

"Because that's what educated people speak." Clipper chimed in.

"I see."

They stood there awkwardly; Gillian stiff-backed and refusing to look at either of them, Connor squeezing the knuckles of his hand, and Clipper's eyes darting back and forth between the two of them. Connor just barely kept from squirming. He knew why Gillian had tried to keep it a secret, not wishing to be seen as uppity or ungrateful, and that she would not accept his protestations that he did not find her actions insulting. So how could he make it clear that he did not disapprove of her attempts to educate herself?

"I -" He stopped and cleared his throat. "Would you perhaps - like some - some help?" he asked, trying not to sound doubtful of her own abilities. When she turned to look at him, he flushed. "I do not mean to sound as if you are stupid," he rushed to assure her, "it is just that I know the verb tenses - they can be rather tricky -"

"You aren't angry?" Gillian said, sounding far quieter than Connor had ever heard her be before.

Nervously, he tapped his fingertips together. "No," he confessed.
Opening her mouth, it looked like she was about to say something when Uncle William strode in behind her.

"Ah, Connor," he said, "I was looking for you -"

He paused and looked around the room. Gillian hastily shoved the book behind her skirts.

"...Is something going on here?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. All three of them simultaneously shook their heads.

He held their gazes for a moment, looking suspicious. Then he sighed and shrugged.

"Right," he said, "I won't ask, then. Connor," he said, turning and focusing on him, "I wanted to ask you to be present tomorrow when the weapons that your uncle asked for are delivered. I'll need your help making sure everything is put away properly; it's the servants' day off. It might also be good for you to meet my supplier."

For a moment, Connor wanted to ask why, then he spotted the subtle movement of Uncle William's hands. He was subtly pointing towards his Templar ring.

Oh.

"I will be there," Connor promised.

Uncle William nodded, a faint shadow of pleasure at his comprehension crossing his face. Tucking his hands behind his back, he nodded at Clipper and Gillian.

"Well," he said, "in that case, I will see you at dinner, Connor."

He then turned on his heel and walked out of the kitchen.

The next morning dawned far too bright and early. Groaning, Connor sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. Gillian had taken him up on his offer of helping her with her Latin, and he had ended up dreaming of verb tenses. Sliding out of his bed, he slowly and reluctantly began to dress himself.

After all, he had to make a good impression on Uncle William's arms dealer.

Dark trousers and boots, a light blue cravat wrapped around his neck and a dark blue waistcoat, patterned with the Templar Cross made a neat picture of him as he looked in the mirror as he tied his hair back with a blue ribbon. Looking carefully at his eyes, he grunted as he noticed that there were dark circles underneath his eyes. Hopefully Uncle William would not pick up on them; he did not want to have to explain himself, both for his own sake and Gillian's.

However, by the time he got out to the lawn and the shipment had arrived, there had been thankfully no comments. Uncle William had been far too absorbed in going over the contract between him and the arms dealer and explaining the clauses to Connor to really notice anything outside of his papers. Then the man had arrived.

"Mister Smithson!" Uncle William called, briefly raising an arm in greeting at the man standing by the wagon's snorting horses, "You're early, for once."

The man, dark-haired and neatly shaven, shrugged and flashed a crooked smile at the two of them, clear interest showing in his eyes as he looked at Connor. The young man tried not to squirm. "I figured that the sooner I got this shipment over with, the sooner I could get back to drinking my money away!" he called back.
Both men chuckled.

"Alright then," Uncle William said, pulling a sheet from the sheaf of papers he held under his arm, "I don't suppose you would mind me looking over the delivery to make sure that everything is in order?"

"Not at all," the man said, "though if you don't mind, might I be introduced to the young lad you have with you?"

Smiling, Uncle William gestured for Connor to come closer. Hesitantly, he obeyed, his old shyness with new people coming back with a vengeance. Clapping a hand on his shoulder, the older man turned back to the arms dealer.

"This, Mister Smithson," he said, sounding oddly proudful, "is Mister Connor Kenway; he came to study underneath me."

Smithson's eyes sharpened. "Kenway, you say?" he said slowly, peering closely at Connor, "Is he -"

"The Grandmaster's son?" Uncle William nodded. "Yes."

Smithson's eyebrows shot up on his face. "Really?" he said, "I thought the man didn't like to let him out of his sight."

Uncle William shrugged. "Perhaps," he said, "but I suppose he judged that the benefits outweighed the risks in this case. Anyways, I've been showing him some things; do you mind if I take him and show him what to look for in a good shipment?"

"Go ahead." Turning, he winked at Connor, who had started to fiddle with his hands nervously. "If you have any questions about how I do things, lad, don't be afraid to ask, eh?" he said. Connor sheepishly nodded. A small, cynical part of him wondered if the man would have been so friendly if Connor wasn't the son of his boss. However, as they went from wagon to wagon, making marks on the sheet of paper as they found everything in order, he found himself slowly relaxing. Smithson indeed had seemed happy to answer his questions about why some things were packed in certain ways, and why they were transported by land rather than sea. All in all, despite his tiredness, Connor found it to actually be an enjoyable morning.

He did find it a relief when everything was finally finished, though. The sun was high in the sky by that time, and his stomach was growling, punishing him for skipping breakfast. Spotting his inattention, Smithson gave a rueful laugh.

"I suppose such things aren't quite as interesting as lunch, eh, lad?" he said. Connor blushed at being called out on his wandering attention. "Well, in any case," he said, rolling up his copy of the documents, "everything looks to be in order. Pleasure doing business with you as always, Master Johnson." Holding out his hand, the two older men shook on it.

"Well, lad," Uncle William said, turning as the wagons began to leave, "the only thing now is to finish writing up the paperwork for Captain Cormac."

"He will be the one delivering the weapons to the villages, then?" Connor asked.

"Aye," the older man nodded, beginning to walk back to the house, "his is the only ship in the Templar fleet small enough to go up the rivers without trouble. He should be here the day after tomorrow."
Connor felt a small curl of pleasure go through him at that thought. It hadn't exactly been ages since he had seen his Uncle Shay, but it had still been a few weeks. He was used to seeing him more often than that; they lived in the same city, after all, with Uncle Shay often working closely with Connor's father on some project or another. It would be nice to talk to him again.

Reaching his hands above him, Connor stretched. Above him, the sky was blue and cloudless, fully into the swing of another lovely spring day. Perhaps he would visit Clipper again, he mused, and see if he wanted to hunt together. It would be good practice with a gun.

Something glittered in the foliage above him. Connor barely had time to identify it as the barrel of a rifle when the crack of it firing reached his ears and Uncle William crumpled in front of him with a shout of pain.

Panic froze his limbs. Staring at the kneeling, hunched over figure of his Uncle, Connor looked around wildly. What had just happened?

Then with a crash, a man with a white hood dropped from the tree where Connor had first noticed the glint. Connor's legs shook as he looked up at him, his eyes almost seeming to glow in the shadows of his hood. Then there was another crash behind him, and another, and turning his head Connor saw two more hooded figures appear out of the foliage.

Assassins.
Connor felt like his feet had been frozen to the ground.

In front of him was his Uncle William, half-collapsed on the ground and with a dark, wet patch rapidly spreading on his coat. His harsh breaths mingled with the echoes of the gunblast that had knocked him to the ground and the ringing in Connor's ears.

On the other side of him were three white-hooded people. Two men and a woman. Assassins. And if Connor was remembering his talks with his father correctly, those white hoods meant that they were Master Assassins, and as such so far out of his experience level that it wasn't even funny. Uncle Shay's stories, of how he was attacked and left for dead simply for disagreeing on their methods at one point, of how they had hunted him down after realizing he was still alive, killing people left and right for reasons as small as running errands for a known Templar, surged forth from his memories like a rogue wave. Everyone had had stories to share that were similar, even his father, the first time they had sat down together to discuss the war between the two factions. His stories of James Taylor and the things he had done had given Connor nightmares for a week afterwards.

One of the men cocked his gun and took a step towards him.

His own harsh breathing reached his ears. Stupid, stupid! Why hadn't he brought any weapons with him! Now he was going to die, and he wouldn't even be able to put up a fight.

The man paused as Connor shuffled back. His head turned slightly to look at the other Assassins, and silent communication passed between them. Connor tried to inch closer to Uncle William. The door had been open to capture the spring breeze after a long, hard winter of being shut up. Maybe, just maybe if he could grab him and run to the house without being killed...

Then the man turned back to him and lifted the pistol, aiming it squarely at Connor's chest. His heart sank. Even in the shadows of the man's hood, he could see his narrow, calculating eyes looking him over.

"Come on now, lad," the man said. Connor felt a small bit of hysterical amusement; the man's accent was almost exactly the same as Uncle Shay's, a rich, rolling burr that made the speaker sound as if they had marbles in their mouth. "Don't try to be a hero now. Let us finish our business with your master here and we'll let you go."

Connor gulped and clenched his fists, steeling himself to say some very stupid words.

"No."

The man cocked his head.

"No?" he asked.

Connor shook his head furiously. "I won't let you kill Uncle William," he said, hating how his voice wavered. "He doesn't deserve to be killed by the likes of you."

Now the man looked amused.

"Doesn't deserve, you say?" he asked, an undercurrent of laughter cutting through his words. "Lad, do you have the slightest idea as to what this man has done over the years? Who he works with?"
"Connor," came the strained voice of Uncle William. Connor risked a glance over at him. He was crouching, now, having managed to get his feet under him. Clutching at his injured shoulder, his face was pale and sweaty underneath the spatter of blood on one cheek.

"Connor lad, don't," he gasped, "don't be a hero. Go back in the house. Don't let them kill you." His eyes squeezed shut. "I'm an old man anyways -"

"No," Connor pushed out his chin and squared his shoulders, turning back to the Assassins. "I won't let you kill him without a fight."

The female Assassin chuckled and shook her head. "Boy," she said in a raspy voice, "listen to your uncle here." Her eyes glittered. "This isn't a fight you can win."

"Connor!"

The shout made everyone look to the doorway. Connor's eyes widened at the sight of a pale-faced and wide-eyed Fillian standing in the doorway, staring at the scene in front of him. As if he was swimming through honey, Connor turned to see the main Assassin's gun swinging, readjusting to point at the younger boy -

A loud crack echoed through the air. The third Assassin, the male one, suddenly grunted and grabbed his shoulder. The Assassin with the gun flinched and turned back to check on his friend, his gun wavering, and Connor took his chance.

Darting to Uncle William, he grabbed the older man's collar and half-hauled him to his feet, ignoring his shout of pain as he began to drag him to the doorway. Taylor and the mercenaries had arrived.

More gunshots boomed as he half-carried, half-dragged his honorary uncle through the door. Then the screams of pain started. Laying Uncle William down as quickly as he could without aggravating the man's injuries even more, he turned to Fillian, who was still standing by the doorway and staring out of it with horror.

"Close the door!" he shouted, "Close the door right now!"

Fillian was agonizingly slow to react. He had only just grabbed the doorframe when Connor, his hands slippery with blood, grabbed it as well and slammed it shut. The doorjamb only just missed crushing the boy's fingers.

The door muffled most of the noise coming from outside. Standing in front of it with his limbs shaking, Connor swallowed convulsively. His bloody handprint on the whitewashed wood seemed to almost glow in the dimness of the front hall.

Behind him, there was the muffled sound of footsteps rapidly heading towards them. Tensing, Connor swung around to meet them only to see Gillian burst into the room, pale-skinned and wielding a large carving knife in front of her. Her eyes widened once she saw them.

"What happened?" she asked, dropping to her knees beside the white-faced Uncle William. Her hands, one still clutching at the cleaver, hovered uselessly over his bloodied shoulder from where he lay on the floor. Connor licked his lips and swallowed, his throat dry.

"I - Assassins," he said helplessly, "they - they shot Uncle William -"

There was a loud bang from the door, which rattled against its hinges. Connor's head jerked around to stare at it. Listening, he realized in horror that there were no more sounds of fighting coming
from the outside. Fillian whimpered.

He couldn't panic. He couldn't panic! Breathing in sharply, Connor turned back to the McCarthy siblings and his uncle.

"We need to get somewhere more defensible," he said, "somewhere that can be barricaded against the Assassins."

"My room," Uncle William said from the floor. His face was pure white now, sweaty, and contrasting greatly against his red clothes. He was breathing great harsh gulps of air, his eyes barely open. "You can lock my door - cover the windows -"

"Don't talk," Gillian said. Her face was grey, and she was staring up at Connor with fear in her eyes. Still, her voice was steady as she pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it to the older man's injury. It was quickly soaked through with blood.

"He's right, though," Connor said, chewing the inside of his cheek as he recalled the few times he had been inside the older man's room. It had only a single window, he knew, and several pieces of large furniture that could probably be moved to in front of the door to keep it from being opened.

"Yes," he said, nodding, "we'll move to his room. Gillian," he pointed at the girl, "grab his shoulders. I'll take his feet. Fillian, you will have to open doors for us. Do not forget to close them behind you!"

Connor was really the only person there with any real amount of muscle. Both Gillian and Fillian, despite having put on weight since entering the Kenway household, were still physically weak compared to him, and as such Gillian struggled with Uncle William's shoulders. Several times, it looked like she was on the verge of dropping him as they made their way up the stairs and down the hallway to the master bedroom. But eventually, they managed to get the pale-faced and sweating man into his bed.

The master bedroom was one of the larger rooms of the house. Decorated in a mix of English colonial furniture and Kanien'ke:ha wall hangings and blankets, it was a warm and comfortable room. The few times Connor had been in it before, he had liked it quite a bit.

Right now, though, as he and Gillian struggled to gently put Uncle William down on the curtained bed so that his injury wouldn't get any worse, Connor couldn't spare the energy to appreciate the tasteful decoration. The older man's eyes had fluttered shut at the top of the stairs, and Connor was grimly certain that the amount of blood on Gillian and his' hands were the cause of that .

"He's bleeding a lot," Fillian noted, his voice quavering. Connor bit his lip.

"I know," he admitted. He had to stop the bleeding. Looking around, there wasn't a lot that he could do. There was no way that he'd be able to remove the bullet; he needed proper tools for that, he knew, proper doctor's tools, and those were in scarce supply out here on the frontier.

But there were the bed curtains. Feeling them between his fingers, his brain began to come back to life, his panic receding. Turning to the McCarthy siblings, who were standing behind him and shifting from one foot to the other nervously, he began to give orders.

"Gillian, Fillian, push that chest of drawers," he said, pointing at the plain-carved chest that was pushed up against the wall, "and put it in front of the door. After that, I'll need your help in ripping these up for bandages."

The two of them nodded and got to it. Ignoring the grinding noise as the chest was dragged along
the wooden floor, Connor turned back to the bed. He grasped the dark red cloth and pulled hard. It came free rewardingly easy. Ripping it apart was easy too, especially once the siblings finished with the chest and began to help him.

It was only once he had begun to properly wrap the wound, Uncle William's breath rasping in his ears, that Gillian asked the question that had been in the back of his mind all of this time.

"What are we going to do?"

Connor tensed.

"I don't know."

"We can't stay in this room forever -"

"I know!" Connor snapped. He immediately felt terrible as Gillian shrank back from him. Taking a deep breath, he apologized. "I am sorry, but I don't know what to do either. They won't get bored, I know that, so we'll have to stay awake to make sure that they don't manage to get in."

Fillian whimpered, his eyes wide.

"They can climb?" he asked.

Connor nodded jerkily.

"Yes," he said. Biting his lip again, he added, "They are also far better trained and experienced than me. If they get in here -" He cut himself off and shook his head.

Beside him, Gillian was gnawing her own lip. "So what can we do?" she asked.

Connor didn't answer for a moment. Thinking furiously, he tried to figure out what they could do if the Assassins managed to get into the house or the room.

A straight-on fight wasn't possible. Those were Master Assassin's that had been outside, there was no way that he or the siblings could take even one down outside of surprise, and that would only work with one. The other two would be easily alerted by their friend's death and then promptly attack them.

But neither could they wait them out. There was no water in the room, except for what was in the pitcher on the dressing table for washing one's face in the morning. Nor was there food. The Assassins on the other hand could easily hunt on the land or help themselves to whatever was in the storehouses.

Perhaps they could send a message? But they'd have to get a pigeon first -

Uncle Shay.

Uncle William just that morning had told Connor that he would be by to pick up the weapons so that they could be shipped to his people! What had he said, the day after tomorrow?

"My Uncle Shay, the captain of the ship that brought us up here," he said, tying off the knot that would keep the bandages in place, "he will be here the day after tomorrow."

Looking at the siblings' confused faces, he hastened to add, "He specializes in this sort of thing. In taking down Assassins. He'll be able to help us once he arrives."
Looking back down at Uncle William, now lying very still with his eyes closed, only the pulse jumping in his throat showing that he was still alive, Connor could only hope that he was right.

Lying on the rug in front of the fireplace with Gillian and Fillian curled up next to him, covered by an extra quilt, Connor had listened to his honorary uncle's breathing slowly rasp away during the night. Sleeping in shifts, the three of them took turns keeping watch while the other two dozed, all of them too keyed up and tense, waiting for the next assault by the Assassins. None came, but the occasional glimpse of a white hood amongst the slowly blooming foliage kept them from relaxing. They didn't even dare light the fire or any of the lanterns, lest the light give away where they were in the house to them. The cold in the air was merciless in reminding them of it only being early spring; all of them were shivering by the time the sun rose.

The first peek outside was not encouraging. Looking out onto the front lawn, there was nothing but a tangled blanket of bloodied limbs and still bodies stretching all the way to the forest. They were piled on top of one another in such a way as to render it near impossible for Connor to figure out how many were dead. The lack of movement other than the occasional animal coming to scavenge, though, was not encouraging. The blood also kept him from figuring out if any of the Assassins were among the dead - after all, all it took was one lucky bullet to kill a man. But even with that possibility, Connor was unwilling to risk trying to get help from Johnstown. The risk that the Assassins were simply waiting for them to relax was too high, and he was not about to let them all be killed just because of his own foolishness.

Changing the bandages, Connor was gratified to see that the bleeding had finally stopped. Now that it was not a rush to keep the older man from bleeding to death, Connor could appreciate the damage that the ball had done to the flesh of the shoulder. It was a twisted mess, covered in dried blood and scabbing, with the hole that the ball had caused being big enough and deep enough for him to stick his finger in up to his second knuckle. Risking using a little of the water from the washbasin, he cleaned it as best he could with a torn off rag from the bed curtain that they'd been making bandages from. Worryingly, Uncle William didn't wake at any point during this.

There was nothing Connor could do, though. So he wrapped it back up as best he could with fresh-torn bandages and settled back. The three of them continued their rotating watch, barely peeking over the windowsill so that they wouldn't be spotted. The occasional sound of footsteps on the roof and rattling windows being checked if they were locked were for much of the day were the only real sounds they heard. Otherwise, though, there was no sign of the Assassins. As the sun passed over the yardarm, Connor even began to start to believe that perhaps the Assassins had left to recoup their strength after fighting off the mercenaries.

Eventually, though, their luck ran out. That afternoon, Uncle William began to moan in his unconsciousness, thrashing weakly about the bed and sweating furiously.

From where he was sitting on the carpet with Gillian, working on conjugating Latin verbs, Connor looked up with concern.

"What's with him?" Fillian asked quietly from his seat by the window. "Is he having nightmares?"

Getting up, Connor walked over to the older man on the bed and sat down beside him, leaning on his wrists to stop his thrashing. Behind him, he heard Gillian get up from her seat as well.

This close to the man, he could smell a faint, sour odour that tickled his memory and made his gut clench in dread. After Uncle William had stilled, he began to carefully peel back the bandages that he had just changed that morning. The smell that rolled out in a wave as each layer was peeled back was nauseating.
Finally, though, the source of Uncle William's thrashing was uncovered.

Thick red lines emanated from the man's injury, heating up the skin around it until it was almost too hot to touch. Not so hot, though, that it stopped Connor from gently pressing down. The thick bead of pus that welled up had Gillian gagging behind him, wet coughing noises that caused his own gorge to rise as well.

"It's infected," he said, his voice far steadier than he felt.

"H-how?" Gillian asked, her voice shaking. "It was fine this morning when we first changed it."

Connor shrugged, his eyes still glued on the pus-oozing injury. "I don't know," he said hopelessly, "wounds can become putrid very fast, I know, but I have never seen it this close before."

"So what are we going to do?" Fillian asked. His voice was thin and pinched, like when Connor had first met him. Looking over his shoulder, Connor saw that both of them were looking at him. He gulped, the sour smell of sickness clinging to the back of his throat.

They were counting on him. Both of them. And so was Uncle William. Connor was the one who had been trained to take charge in situations such as these. Right now, though, he found himself desperately wishing for someone to tell him what to do.

"We need a doctor," he said slowly, thinking.

"Yeah," Gillian agreed, her pronunciation slipping into its lower class roots, "but the nearest one is in Johnstown. There's no way we'll be able to get there without -"

"Without a distraction."

She tensed at Connor's words. Fillian's eyes darted between the two of them.

"No," she said firmly, pointing at him with one shaking finger.

"Yes," Connor said, standing up from the bed.

"What?" Fillian asked, "What are you saying no to?"

"He's going to be the distraction," Gillian said before Connor could do more than open his mouth. "He's going to be stupid and self-sacrificing and get himself killed -"

"It's the only way!" Connor said firmly. Straightening his back, he tried to look a stoic as possible, disguising how his insides felt as if they were made of jelly. "I have been coming to Uncle William's lands since I was a child. I know these trees better than either of you, and the Assassins know that I care about Uncle William. If I go outside, I can lead them on a chase that will give one of you time to get to the town and get help."

"And get yourself killed!" Gillian snapped, taking a step towards him. "You said so yourself - those are Assassins! They eat little boys like you for breakfast!"

"And they would completely devour you or your brother!" Connor snapped back, stiffening. "I am the only one with even the smallest chance of escaping them!"

Both of the siblings froze when he raised his voice. Sighing, Connor softened it.

"Listen," he said, "I would not be able to forgive myself if anything happened to either of you. And I am the best out of all of us at fighting. This is not up for debate." He raised a hand to cut Gillian
off before she could protest again. "Not up for discussion. Fillian, I know that you are excellent at running - would you be able to reach Johnstown?"

His face pale, the younger boy nodded. "I haven't been slacking off," he volunteered.

"Alright then," Connor said. "Gillian, you will stay in the room with Uncle William. Try to keep him cool and drain the pus. Fillian," he said, pinning the boy in place with a sharp look, "five minutes after I have left through a window, I want you to come out as well and run for Johnstown. Stick to the road, it will lead you right to there."

Turning back to the girl, who was now staring at her feet with red cheeks, he softened his voice further. "I will be back shortly after he leaves, hopefully," he said gently. Reaching out, he hesitantly patted her shoulder.

"I swear," he said, "I will not die."
Bad Business Part 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After the stuffiness of the sickroom, redolant with the stench of infection, the air outside was cold and crisp and utterly refreshing. Connor wanted nothing more than a moment to appreciate it, but forced himself to keep moving. He needed to get into position.

He was downstairs in the dining room, on the opposite side of the house from the bedroom where Gillian was sitting by Uncle William's bed with a knife in her hand for defending herself if the plan failed. By going out this window, Connor hoped, the Assassins would not be able to track down which of the rooms that they were hiding in. Fillian was crouched by another window, his hook that he used for climbing in his hand. He would follow Connor outside after several minutes.

Pressing his forehead against the windowsill, Connor pushed/felt. The world dissolved, and the sharp feeling of vertigo shot through him as his vision floated up into the sky, higher than the highest treetops and looking down at Mount Johnson.

Looking around, there was a reassuring lack of sharp/red/hot in the area, like a mouthful of red-hot nails. Only three of them, with two right by the road and the third by the path down to the bay. The third hot nail, though, was moving around a bit, and heading back towards the other two the long way around. That was reassuring for two reasons - one, it meant that the Assassins hadn't called for reinforcements like Connor had feared. Secondly, it also meant that if Connor timed everything correctly, he could possibly get all three of the Assassins chasing after him at once.

A sharp pain lancing through his head like needles being driven through his eyes reminded him that if such a plan was to come about, he would have to move now. Dropping his sight back down to normal, he spared a quick rub to the bridge of his nose and nodded sharply at Fillian, who nodded back. Then he pushed the window open and slipped out.

The air outside was even more refreshing, reminding Connor of a swim in Kanatahse:ton's lake on a hot summer's day. He didn't dare stop to enjoy it, though. He sprinted as quickly as he could to the nearest tree, pulling himself up into its branches and then risking another look around with his Eagle-Eye View. The two Assassins were still by the road, but the third had stopped by the sheer cliff that lead straight down into the second bay by the house. Connor bit his lip, and hoped that he hadn't stopped for any particular reason, like setting up a trap. It was going to be hard enough to stay out of the Assassins hands, even with his home field advantage in the forest surrounding Mount Johnson. Hopefully he wouldn't have to deal with any traps on top of that.

He set off further into the trees. He would loop around, then, coming up behind the road Assassins. His bow and quiver were a reassuring weight on his back, and the hidden blades that he had retrieved from their hiding place in Uncle William's office held fast to his wrists. He could do this, he told himself, he could get the Assassins away from the road. He could survive this.

The birds that usually sung in the trees were silent. Connor winced at every creak and rustle he made as he ran from tree to tree. His skin felt like it was going to jump off his body at any moment. God, he hoped that the Assassins wouldn't hear him coming! Pausing on a particularly thickly-leafed branch, he pushed/felt again. Everything was reassuringly the same.

Finally, he came close enough to the main road to spot the flashes of white that marked the positions of the two Assassins. Switching to his normal special sight, they were picked out against
the branches in red, their ill-intentions clear for someone with his vision to see. It was also more clear which of the Assassins they were - one of the men and the woman. Their heads were bent together as if they were talking; as Connor watched, the man placed his hand on the woman's abdomen. He had managed to come up behind them, just a few feet away.

Slowly and silently, just as he had done a thousand times before when hunting deer, Connor unhooked his bow from his back and pulled out an arrow, notching it into the string. Breathing through his nose, he pulled the string back and took aim.

The arrow soared through the air with a soft thwip, ending in a meaty thud and gurgle. The female Assassin fell from her perch, Connor's arrow piercing her neck and having sliced through her spine. The male Assassin gaped in horror for a moment, and then turned his head. Connor only just managed to pull his bow back onto him before the man lunged at him, madness gleaming in his eyes.

When he was questioned later, Connor would not be able to tell much about the chase that then ensued. He remembered leaves passing him by in a green blur, with twigs and other branches slapping him in the face as he ran. The angry shouts and snarls of his pursuer filled his ears as he crashed through the branches behind them, sounding like a fly-maddened bull charging an unfortunate farmhand. He had no doubts, however, that he would have been dead if he didn't know the lay of the land so well.

The Assassin screamed threats as Connor disappeared and reappeared from his sight. They danced through the trees, sometimes getting so close that Connor could feel the man's fingertips skimming along the back of his vest and hear his ragged breaths. His head pulsed with the effort of constantly flicking his Eagle-Eye Vision on and off, barely keeping track of where the Assassin was as he jumped from branch to branch.

Then ahead of him, on the ground, there was a pile of soft leaves and branches, glowing white.

With the Assassin's shouts echoing in his ears, Connor jumped.

Hidden in the pile, with pine needles jabbing at whatever bits of skin that they could reach, Connor held his breath until he was dizzy as he listened to the Assassin run through the branches above his head, still shouting. He waited until the shouted threats faded, and then waited a little longer before he dared get out of the leaf pile.

Brushing the needles off of his clothes as best he could, Connor looked around. He was fairly deep into the forest at this point; close to where he had first met Clipper. Connor hoped that the other boy was okay, and that the Assassins hadn't attacked him. He knew from his father that the Assassins were supposed to have a code about not harming innocents, but his own experiences and his father's stories of James Taylor showed just how easily the rules could be twisted to excuse someone's actions.

Glancing up at the sun, he oriented himself. He would need to hurry back to the house. Hopefully, Fillian was already halfway to Johnstown by now, and would be bringing reinforcements to Mount Johnson by the morning.

Then something cracked Connor across the back of his head, and he blacked out for a second.

He was on the ground, the sour smell of fear and beer filling his nostrils, when he came back to himself.
"They want you, don't they," Matthew Taylor muttered in his ear, his sour breath washing over Connor's face. "You and that hoity-toity master of the house; I says that we should just hand you to them, but do they listen?" He gave a particularly savage twist to Connor's arms, pulling them up and behind his back and making him grit his teeth. "No, they don't listen to me, and now only Taylor's alive, and they're all dead, and that's how its going to stay."

Connor wrenched his head back to look at the older man's face. His eyes showed the whites all around the brown irises, bulging and startling in his filthy face, and a bit of spittle dripped its way down his chin as he continued to mutter.

"Just gotta get their attention, yes, and give you to them, an' then I'm free, I'm free -"

"You won't be," Connor promised, his voice strained and filtered through his clenched teeth. The man's eyes, which had been rolling wildly in his head, stopped and focused in on Connor as if seeing him for the first time.

"What, what, what are you saying?" he snapped, shaking Connor a little. "What you saying about the demons? Why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't they?" He chanted the little three-word sentence over and over again, almost more to himself than to Connor. "They want you, they said so, they said that they wanted the Grandmaster's brat, wanted to kill his little lapdog -"

Connor froze as a chill rolled over his body. They knew? The Assassins knew who he was to his father? He had been working under the assumption that they thought he was one of Uncle William's children or an apprentice or somesuch. If they were planning on using him as leverage over his father along with killing Uncle William...

Taking a deep breath, Connor looked back down and clenched his jaw again. Then he slammed his head back.

He was rewarded with a loud yowl of pain and a splatter of something hot and wet in his hair and the back of his neck. Taylor let go of Connor's arms to hold his face, and Connor took his chance then to scramble to his feet, away from the maddened man.

"They've been talking to you?!" he demanded of the filthy man.

Wildly, the man looked at him, snarling like a wild animal, his chin and mouth slick with a layer of blood. Peeling back his lips to bare his teeth at the younger boy, Connor could see how they were coated with his own blood, the red outlining each tooth grotesquely.

"Yes," he growled, his eyes showing all the white again, "yes, they speak to me, in the trees talking about their plans -" he lunged forward, cutting himself off. Still dizzy from getting hit in the head, Connor just barely managed to skip out of his grasp, sending the older man stumbling over himself and falling into the muck of the forest floor.

"It's your fault," he growled, struggling back to his feet, "you and your master, it's your fault that those demons attacked; saying that they wanted to kill him, take you - you're why my friends are dead!" His voice rose to a shriek at the end of that sentence. He stood in a peculiar, hunched-over way, like some great ape, with his eyebrows pulled down low and shadowing his eyes until they glittered like beetles at dusk, deep in the shadowy pits of his face. His clothes, ripped and stained with what was either dirt or blood, clung to his body with the sweat that Connor could see dripping down his face and neck like rendered fat from bacon. A pair of large cuts bisected his face from cheek to cheek and forehead to the corner of his mouth, both red with what could only be infection. It looked, in short, like Uncle William was not the only one on Mount Johnson in desperate need of a doctor. Somehow, though, he doubted that Taylor would accept any help from a doctor hired by him.
Barely keeping from joining the man on the floor, Connor breathed in and rubbed his head. It was pounding, throbbing, and in general feeling like it was about to fall off of his shoulders and onto the leafy floor. "Did they make a deal with you?" he demanded, letting his hand fall back to his side. "Are they paying you to give me to them?" A horrible thought struck him. "Did you tell them when Uncle William was going to be vulnerable? When there would be fewer witnesses?"

"Fucking savage!" the man snarled, "Just fucking stay still!"

Connor narrowed his eyes.

"Answer the question."

"My payment," the man growled, "will be my life. That's all you're getting from me, nit." And he lunged, again. This time, however, Connor was ready. Unsheathing his hidden blades, he dodged the man again and slashed at his face, sending him reeling back as he tried to dodge mid-lunge. An elbow in his ribs, and he sprawled in the dirt again, this time with Connor kneeling on his chest.

Sticking his blade underneath the man's chin, he asked again; "Did the Assassins make a deal with you?"

Taylor spat in his face.

Grimacing, Connor wiped the glob of pink spittle from his cheekbone, keeping his eyes locked on the man. "That," he informed him, trying to sound like his father when he was truly furious, "was a mistake."

Then all of the hair on Connor's body stood up. Instinctively, he rolled to one side, and just in time as the retort of a pistol firing roared through the air. Taylor gave a short jerk and then gurgled, blood suddenly beginning to trickle from his mouth. Desperately, the man clawed at the front of his shirt as a large red stain appeared on his front and began to spread.

Connor trembled as the Assassin jumped down from the branches where he had been watching them and landed in a crouch. Standing up, the man pushed back his hood, revealing a head full of dark brown hair, cut short and close to his skull. Taking a step forward, his lip curled in disdain as he looked down at Taylor, lying on the ground and bleeding. The mercenary made quiet clicking and gurgling sounds as he looked back up at him. He wildly flopped an arm at the Assassin, grabbing the hem of his long white coat. The Assassin's lip curled back even more, until he was baring his teeth. Then slowly, deliberately, the Assassin raised his foot. And then slowly, deliberately, he slammed it down and broke Taylor's neck with a crack that Connor could hear across the clearing.

Desperately, dumbly, Connor began to try to stumble to his feet.

The Assassin was too fast, though. In four quick steps, he crossed the clearing and grabbed a hold of Connor's collar, dragging him to his feet. Then without a word, he slammed Connor against the nearest tree.

Head first.

Pain exploded from his head and Connor tasted blood. Dragging him back, the Assassin shifted his grip as Connor was still reeling from pain and grasped his hair tightly in a fist before wrenching his head back. Through unfocused eyes, Connor noted hysterically that the Assassin's eyes were as icy as the eyes of the boy all those years ago. The one that had lead those men in the burning of the village, in his torture and his mother's murder.
"You. Little. Savage," the older man snarled. A livid, bleeding cut sliced through the bridge of the man's nose and down his cheek, moving as he spoke. Weakly, Connor grunted and clawed at the man's hand that was still buried in his hair.

That was apparently the wrong thing to do. With a roar, the Assassin slammed Connor's face back against the rough-barked tree, again and again and again until Connor's world narrowed down to the rhythmic waves of pain washing over him with each strike.

After what felt like an extra hard slam, the man dragged him back, away from the tree and threw him contemptuously onto the ground. For a moment, Connor simply lay there on his side, stunned and with the taste and smell of blood filling his senses. Distantly, through the sound of his heartbeat that was marching through his ears, he heard the Assassin coming closer, saying something to him and sounding like the low growl of thunder on the horizon of a storm. Then a sharp kick to his ribs rolled him onto his back.

Gasping, Connor clutched at his ribs, struggling to breathe and praying that the kick hadn't broken any of his ribs. Staring up into the the vaulted ceiling of tree branches above, Connor could just see a bit of the sky, cloudless and blue. Was this how he was going to die, he wondered. On his back, unable to breathe and utterly helpless?

The Assassin swung a leg over him and knelt, grabbing a handful of hair and twisting until Connor was forced to arch his head back, his body screaming in pain. The older man's hidden blade shot out with a final-sounding click, and Connor was just able to make out the sneer on his lips as he looked down at him.

"Now don't you look just like your daddy," he growled. His grip tightened. "Doesn't that just explain so much about you, huh?"

Connor just wheezed, still struggling to breathe. His face felt hot and slick with blood, and he could barely focus his eyes on the man holding a knife to his throat. How many times had the Assassin smashed his head against that tree? The fuzzy memory of Doctor Church's half-slurred lecture on the dangers of head injuries swam in and out of of his mind. He had to get to a doctor soon, didn't he? Otherwise he could just fall asleep and never wake up. He'd been unconscious before; how much more damage had the Assassin done on top of Taylor?

Something glinted in the few rays of light that made their way through the leaves of the trees surrounding them. Connor tried to focus, but couldn't quite make sense of what he was seeing.

"You know," the Assassins said, an undercurrent of cruelty putting lie to his conversational tone, "we were told to bring you back alive to the Mentor. But I'm not much feeling like doing that right now." It was a hidden blade, Connor realized as the Assassin pricked the underside of his chin with it; a real, Assassin's hidden blade. "I think that your dead body will be enough of a signal to your father, anyway. But first -" He said, dragging the knife lazily down Connor's body. "Where are you keeping William Johnson?"

Pain slammed through Connor. His body seized. Gasping, he tried desperately to arch his back, move away, anything to get away from the blade embedded in his gut. The Assassin merely gave his hair a hard yank and grinned down at him, madness sparkling like lightning in his eyes. Leaning over, his sour breath washed over Connor's face as he cooed at him.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" he said, mock-sympathetic. Connor could feel his eyes watering and tears escaping them. Weakly, he tried to reach up, bat away the man's hands. The man smirked and ignored his kitten-soft pats.
"You're not answering," he said in a sing-song tone, and then slowly, so slowly, began to move the knife up.

Connor's mouth fell open, but only a few breathy squeaks managed to escape his bloodied mouth. He could feel every small movement that the knife made; his flesh slowly tearing and being separated from itself, the strange mix of hot and cold as his blood stained his waistcoat and was cooled by the spring air. His ears were ringing like bells. Staring up at the treetops above, he tried to keep his breathing steady and stop the little shakes that were running through his body that amplified the ragged pain that was slicing through him.

The Assassin wouldn't let him, though. Clucking his tongue, he wrenched Connor's head forward until his chin touched his chest. Connor's abdomen clenched automatically and agony tore through him, making him gasp wetly and his eyes fill up with tears. Blinking harshly to clear his vision, he then wished that he hadn't.

Looking down his abdomen, with the man's hidden blade buried deep in his gut, he almost didn't see it at first, his head muddled with pain. And when he did see it, it took a moment for him to understand. But when that understanding hit, he barely managed to keep from throwing up.

A single, pale and glistening loop of his intestines was poking out of the hole that the Assassin's blade had carved into him. It looked almost jelly-like, delicate and wobbling with each harsh breath the young man took and streaked with blood like a butcher's hands after he was done carving up a pig.

The Assassin's chuckle at his fear reverberated through Connor, and his hand began to move again.

He was going to die, Connor realized. This Assassin had no intention of letting him leave the clearing alive, or even getting an answer to his question. He just wanted Connor to hurt, because he had killed the Assassin's friend. And he was going to make sure that Connor's death would be agonizing. If he didn't die from shock or blood loss, then infection would get him. Or an animal would come along, attracted by the smell of blood, and begin to eat him. And despite himself, despite everything he had been taught about stoicism in the face of terror or pain, Connor began to weep.

The Assassin laughed. "Not so tough now, are you?" he jeered, his voice backed up with the wet noises of Connor's belly being sliced open. "Only brave while running away. Just like every other Templar -"

The sound of a gun cocking filled the clearing.

"P-put the knife down and get away from him!" His face wet with blood and tears, barely able to focus his eyes through the pain, Connor rolled his head to one side towards the voice and then threw up a little on the ground. The Assassin's blade stilled, and he shifted to look to his side.

It was Clipper, standing there with shaking knees and a determined look on his face.

Chapter End Notes

I have been looking forward to this chapter for ages! Let me know what you think in the comments :)
Bad Business Part 6

Connor wanted to shout at Clipper, warn him to run. But he couldn't find the air in his lungs to do so.

Standing across the clearing, the hunter stood with his rifle on his shoulder and his knees visibly knocking, even to Connor's unfocused eyes. His face was white, with only two spots of colour high on his cheeks, but his lips were pressed together with grim determination.

The Assassin's face was similarly still. "This ain't something you wanna go about sticking your nose into, boy," he warned, his voice thick with menace. "Believe me, this boy's earned this here." He gave a savage twist of his wrist, and his blade ripped free from where it had been buried in Connor's gut.

Connor screamed and squeezed his eyes shut as the blade tore through the flesh that it had been lying under before forcing his jaw back together so hard that his teeth clicked. Grinding them together, he tried to get his breathing under control enough to warn Clipper. This was not some bandit or poacher; this was an Assassin! Trained to kill until it was second nature, brainwashed until they believed that anyone who opposed them were their enemies. Clipper was just a young boy, and he didn't stand a chance against such an opponent!

Swallowing down the metallic taste of his blood, Connor took a shallow breath, trying not to jostle his wound. "Clipper," he said weakly, "don't do this. He'll -"

A blow to the side of Connor's head made his head snap to one side, dragging the rest of his body along and tearing his wound open just a little more and causing a new wave of pain to slam into him with all of the power of a rogue wave. His gorge rose and he smelt the sharp smell of ozone before lightning struck.

"Stop it!" Clipper screamed shrilly, his voice echoing oddly in the ringing of Connor's ears, "Stop hurting him! He doesn't deserve this!"

"Boy," the Assassin snapped, "this savage just murdered my pregnant wife! Now you look me in the eye and say he don't deserve this!"

Through his tears, Connor saw Clipper falter slightly before the vehemence of the Assassin's words. His lips moved soundlessly, or at least Connor thought it was soundlessly, mouthing the accusation over to himself as if he couldn't believe it. His rifle drooped ever so slightly; not quite to the ground, but more like from the head to the chest of his target. Then Clipper visibly steeled himself - apparently he really couldn't believe what the Assassin had said.

"Connor ain't like that!" he shouted back. "You're lying! And even if he did you were talking about Master Johnson too! How's that figure into you story!"

Oh Clipper, Connor thought, please don't. I'm not worth it. As much as it warmed his heart to hear himself defended so, Connor couldn't bear to see his friends injured because of him. Widening his eyes, he tried to urge the younger boy to stop, to run, but Clipper's focus was on the Assassin and not him. His rifle was no longer wavering.

The Assassin, who was still kneeling on top of him, didn't seem happy either. He flicked his hidden blade in and out in a nervous tic that Connor recognized from Uncle Shay, who did the same thing while thinking. The Assassin's eyes darted around the clearing, bouncing from Clipper to Connor.
"Master Johnson," and the man spat out the name like it was something foul, "is no innocent either! If you knew even half of the things he's done -"

"Shut up!" Clipper shouted. "I won't have you slandering these people here!

"It ain't slander if it's true you twaddle-pated moron!" the man screamed back. "Him," and he gave Connor a rough shake, making him give out a strangled scream, "and his master have lied, murdered, cheated and stolen their way across the colonies! I'm doing this to protect people like you!"

"If this is your protection, then I want no part of it!" Clipper snapped, and then cocked his gun. "This is your last chance. Get off Connor, or I shoot!"

The Assassin snarled, his face twisting into something ugly. Glaring at Clipper, his hidden blade clicked out one last time and didn't get resheathed. "Think carefully, boy," he said, "because you will not be walking away from here if you don't leave now."

Clipper stuck out his rounded chin stubbornly. "I'm not the one with a gun pointed at him," he said, narrowing his eyes.

The Assassin shifted his weight above Connor, also narrowing his eyes. "Best shoot true, then," he said, "because you'll only be getting one chance."

Then he lunged. Connor opened him mouth, trying to scream a warning at his friend. Everything seemed to slow down around him. The Assassin's hidden blade gleamed in the sunlight; Clipper let out a breath through his nose and squinted down the rifle of his gun; and then the crack of the gun firing broke the air and the upper half of the Assassin's head disappeared in a bloody mist.

The world came back to normal speed as the Assassin's body hit the ground with a thump. His arms shaking hard enough that Connor could hear the barrel of the rifle rattling, Clipper crossed the clearing and fell to his knees beside Connor.

"Connor!" he cried, dropping his rifle carelessly onto the forest floor. Reaching out to the gut wound, he hesitated, his hands hovering uselessly. Looking up at him, trying to breathe shallowly so as not to bother the injury, Connor tried to focus in on the other boy's face.

"S-sir, Connor, Connor, what do I do?!" Clipper begged, rocking back and forth on his knees, shaking his head and staring in horror at the loops of intestines poking out of the hole in Connor's side. His hands fluttered uselessly in the air, advancing and retreating, and his eyes were wide enough for its whites to be easily visible even with as fuzzy as Connor's vision was becoming from blood loss.

Clumsily reaching out, Connor caught one of the hands in his own to get his attention. Licking his lips, he ignored the coppery taste of his own blood on them and began to speak as best he could.

"D-don't," he said, struggling for breath, "panic! I need," and he squeezed shut his eyes, thinking furiously through the pain, "I need bandages. To hold me in."

Clipper nodded furiously, until it almost looked like his head would pop off like a doll's. His pack hit the ground with an incongruously soft thump, and he tore into it, scattering his belongings across the ground. "I have a sash," he muttered furiously, "will that do?"
Tiredly, Connor nodded. With the Assassin gone, he felt exhausted and shaky, almost too weak to move. Intellectually, he knew that that was a bad sign that he was losing too much blood, and that he should be panicking. But even with the thick stench of his own blood filling the air, all he could really feel was kind of woozy. The pain from his side was terrible. It felt like a hot poker had been dragged up his middle, and the chill of the spring air against his exposed insides was nauseating. And on top of that, all he could do to combat the pain was control his breathing, taking deep even breaths and wincing whenever a particularly deep breath jostled his side.

He wanted to be home. To be curled up in his chair by the fire, reading a book and with a cup of hot tea at his elbow. He wanted his father to be in the chair opposite of him, reading his own book and enjoying their rare free time together.

Despite himself, he felt a fresh wave of tears welling up in his eyes. Was this how he was going to die? On the forest floor with sticks digging into his back, his guts hanging out and his father still disappointed in him?

No, whispered a soft, strangely familiar voice.

Opening his eyes, Connor saw a very familiar face hovering over him. Bearded, his hair messy and wearing what looked to be some strange sort of modified toga, it was Consus. Wrinkling his brow, Connor slowly looked down his body to his feet, where Clipper was still looking through his bag. Looking back up, he watched as Consus pressed a finger to his lips, gesturing for silence. It was like before, he realized; only he could see his old imaginary friend.

Connor had first begun to see the strange, see-through man that one terrible night where the Assassins had kidnapped him. The strange figure had first appeared as he had laid close to death in the Assassin safe house, staring across the room, and had then helped him escape and make his way to Hickey before disappearing. That was not the last time Connor had seen him, though. After that night, Consus had appeared again and again. When Connor was lonely, he would sit beside him and his toys and tell him stories about his own family. Outside, he would explain how baby birds grew inside of their eggs, and during lessons with Connor's tutors, he would correct them whenever they spoke of scientific matters, speaking of the great patterns inherent in nature.

Connor's laughter during his lessons had been hard to explain. Even when he had told his father of Consus, it had been awkward to explain that his friend disappeared whenever he or the others in the Templar Inner Circle were around. Eventually, Consus had been dismissed as an imaginary friend rather than anything more, and as Connor had gotten older, Consus had slowly begun to appear less and less. By the time Connor was ten, he had stopped appearing at all.

L-little Wolf, Consus murmured, you mustn't die here. You have to live.

I thought you were imaginary, Connor wanted to say. But his mouth wouldn't move. After Consus had disappeared for the last time, Connor had thought he was a dream, a way to deal with what was, despite his father's best attempts, a fairly lonely upbringing.

"Connor!" Clipper suddenly shouted. Jerking, Connor hissed as his injury twisted, sending a shooting pain up his side. He looked down at the other boy to see that he was holding up a long bolt of rough-looking red cloth, patterned in checks.

Scooting forward on his knees, he hovered over Connor with his fingers tangled in the cloth and a determined look on his face.

"Alright," he said, "what do I do?"

Connor blinked once, slowly. Consus was gone, again. Breathing in, he mustered his muzzy mind
and tried to remember what he had been told about treating wounds.

"Push my, my guts back in," he said slowly, "they can't stay," he gestured clumsily, "stay outside."

Clipper's throat bobbed. To his credit though, he barely hesitated, and quickly and surprisingly gently began to push the glistening coils of Connor's intestines back inside of the injury. No amount of gentleness, however, could help; little shocks of pain shot up through him, joining the chorus of pain that Connor's body had become.

As the last little bit of gut was tucked in, Connor sighed. He was so tired. He just wanted to close his eyes. A sharp pat on the side of his face, just on this side of a slap, kept him from doing so though. Opening his eyes, he saw that Clipper's face was white.

"Connor, sir," he urged, "don't go to sleep! Stay with me! What do I do next?"

Connor's mouth tasted like dirt. He hated it when he bled inside of it.

Swallowing, his throat dry, he said, "Wrap the cloth around me. Tie it, tie it tightly, but not too tightly." He was having more and more trouble keeping his eyes open. "It's going to keep my guts from falling out."

Clipper did just that. Again, his hands were uselessly gentle. He had to lift Connor's abdomen up, huffing slightly with the effort and stretching the wound back open. Connor squeezed his eyes shut and tried to ignore the few tears that escaped, carving paths through the mask of blood on his face.

Knotting the two ends of the cloth together, Clipper rocked back on his heels. "Alright," he said, wiping the blood off on his shirt, "now what?"

"Take me back," Connor said, his voice frighteningly soft even to his own ears, "Take me back to the house. Gillian, Gillian's there."

"The maid?" Clipper asked. Bending over, he pulled Connor's arm over his shoulders. "On three, ready? One, two, three!"

Connor moaned in pain as he was pulled to his feet, all the air in his lungs forced out through his gritted teeth. "Y-yes, the maid," he said after catching his breath.

"I see. She was learning Latin wasn't she? How's that going?"

Distantly, Connor answered as they began to move. It took several moments, but eventually he realized why Clipper was asking so many questions. He was trying to keep Connor from falling unconscious. An echo of appreciation went through him. That was clever of him, to realize what he had to do.

Half-staggering, half-carried, Clipper and Connor stumbled their way through the forest. Clipper continued to babble on, asking Connor question after question, which he found himself struggling to answer.

Each footfall seemed to jostle his innards, which slipped and slid over each other, pressing against the rough cloth sash tied around his middle in a nauseating way. His head and neck ached fiercely from being slammed against the tree so many times, feeling nothing more than like carpenters were hitting him with their hammers over and over again. His ears rang too; maybe it was actually blacksmiths then, making swords in such quantities that the noise was drowning Clipper's voice out.
Finally, after an eternity of walking, the reached the clearing where Mount Johnson stood. Connor was so relieved by the blurry sight of the manor that he could have fallen to his knees and kissed the ground if he wasn't being held up by Clipper.

"What happened?!"

Connor looked up at Clipper for a moment, confused by the horror on his suddenly-pale face. Then he followed the other boy's gaze and understood.

Oh yes. The bodies of the mercenaries. They still lay where they had fallen, sprawled and with their unseeing eyes staring at the sky. Connor could feel Clipper trembling underneath him.

"They tried t'fight," Connor slurred. He clumsily gestured at the bodies lying in piles and shrugged with one shoulder. "They died."

He could hear Clipper swallow convulsively. But still he began to pick his way through the bodies towards the blood-splattered house. The front door yawned open like a mouth, whispering sweet nothings about the bed that awaited him, soft and perfect for lying down in.

Wait.

Something was wrong.

As they got closer and closer to the doorway, the niggling feeling that something was wrong intensified. With how out of it he was from the blood loss, though, Connor couldn't quite corral his thoughts enough to pinpoint what was wrong.

The inside seemed the same as ever. The air inside was blessedly cool on Connor's heated skin as they limped in, the usual smells of bread and wood polish faint in the air. Clipper didn't seem to notice anything amiss either, despite his head swiveling around. Shifting his grip so that Connor was a little steadier, he looked up the stairs with a furrowed brow.

"Hey," he said softly, the silence of the house thick and uncomfortable, "is there a bed down here, or will we have to get up those?" He gestured with his chin towards the dark wood stairs. Raising a head that felt like it had an anvil tied to it, Connor could see his point. The sheer amount of stairs, unassuming when Connor was uninjured, loomed tall and intimidating in front of them, looking as insurmountable as any mountain. Pressing his lips together, he shook his head.

"No," he mumbled, "all of the beds are upstairs."

God, all he wanted to do was go to sleep. His eyelids drooped and he leaned a little more on the other boy. His legs felt weak and heavy, as if he had been clapped in irons and thrown into the sea.

A sharp pat to his face made him open his eyes. Funny. He hadn't even realized that he had closed them.

"Come on," Clipper said, looking worried, "You can rest once we get you to a bed."

Yes. A bed. That sounded so very, very good. Connor's body seemed less sure, though. It didn't seem to want to cooperate with him. He had to swing his whole body into each step on the staircase, his legs feeling stiff and clumsy as if they were made of wood.

They were almost at the top when a loud slam and a scream pierced the silence of the house. Gillian's scream.
Connor's legs were suddenly no longer an obstacle. His muzzy vision and head cleared as suddenly
as a summer thunderstorm.

There had been a third. A third Assassin. Connor had killed one, the woman. Clipper had killed the
other, a man. But there had been a third. A third feeling of red in his Eagle Eye view of the area.

But while his head was clear, Connor's body was still clumsy.

"Clipper!" he said, his voice strained. "There was a third!" The other boy looked down at him,
confused. "A third!" Connor said, begging him to understand. Another loud slam and scream, this
time with the sound of cracking wood, and Clipper's eyes widened in understanding.

Connor hadn't realized just how strong Clipper was before that. The boy hauled him up the stairs
so fast that his head spun, dropping his pack behind them, pulling off his rifle and cocking it in one
smooth motion.

There, at the end of the hall, facing the doorway, was the third Assassin, his hood down and
swinging an axe. As they watched, he slammed it down against the door, carving out another
chunk from its scarred facade and drawing another scream from the room.

Roughly letting Connor down onto the floor, Clipper hauled the rifle up to his eye.

"Step away from the door!" he shouted.

Connor wanted to weep. After everything that the other boy had seen, after the corpses of the
mercenaries and the Assassin gutting him, Clipper was still trying to get the hooded man to
surrender peacefully. He would have laughed if Gillian and Uncle William's lives weren't on the
line.

The Assassin looked over his shoulder with a feral gleam in his eye. "Back off," he growled, his
voice a deep rumble, "or you're going to join them."

Clipper scowled.

"This is your last chance," he warned.

The Assassin's lip curled. "Come on, boy," he growled, "are you really -"

The roar of the rifle was his answer.

Just like the Assassin's companion, he fell to the ground with a thump, half of his head gone in the
bullet's blast.

Connor felt faint. The man had fallen down face first, his shattered head pointing towards him, and
the wet, pink gleaming globs of jelly that was what was left of his brain slid out slowly, staining
the carpet and gleaming in the sunlight from the windows.

Swallowing thickly, the wooziness came back full force, and darkness began to creep into the
edges of Connor's vision. He could feel himself passing out.

"Connor!" Clipper looked down at him, terrified.

"It's okay," Connor mumbled, his eyelids already falling back down. "Jus' tired."

"CONNOR!"
The aftermath of the attack is shown, Haytham makes an appearance (and is displeased), and a plot point that was raised in the first chapter is finally addressed.

Connor didn't remember much of what happened after the last Assassin died. Just bits and pieces. Snatches of voices arguing; one saying that he wasn't going to treat a 'savage', another threatening to cut the first voice's lips off. Still paintings, images frozen in time of people arguing, cleaning, leaning over him and looking worried. But in the end, exhaustion pulled him down before he could make sense of anything. He wondered if such things were a symptom of major blood loss.

If that was so, then that explained why it was so hard for him to open his eyes. It felt as if his eyelids were weighed down and sewn together with thick twine to keep them shut, like some great spirit had decided to take up embroidery in their spare time. But with the birds outside singing encouragement, Connor managed to open them. First a crack, then halfway, and then finally they were completely open.

The first thing to greet him was the sight of a plain, whitewashed ceiling and walls, empty of the adornments that Aunt Molly had decorated Mount Johnson with. The second thing to greet him was pain. Slamming into him like a rogue wave, all of the aches and pains that his flight and fight had caused welled up and spilled over, causing him to screw his eyes shut and moan.

Breathing deeply through his nose, he reopened his eyes. Huh. So he had survived. Connor couldn't say that he had been expecting that after everything that had happened. Old sweat clung to his skin, making him grimace at its stiffness as he turned his head to get a better look at the room that he was in.

It was definitely not the one that he had been staying in previously. Its walls were conspicuously blank like he had noticed before; not even the slightest bit of wood or paint broke the monotony of the walls except for the door. Even the ubiquitous beadwork that had hung everywhere in the halls of Mount Johnson were missing. In fact, it was rather empty of anything at all except for Connor's bed, a small table with a mug and jug on it, and a narrow cot shoved into the corner by the door.

Briefly, Connor wondered if he was still in Mount Johnson at all and tried to sit up to go see. The stabbing pain radiating from where the Assassin had tried to gut him that blazed through him cut those thoughts off and he sank back into the blessed softness of the bed, gasping for breath.

After catching his breath, Connor gingerly peeled back the covers from his abdomen, hoping to see the state of the injury. Disappointingly, his abdomen was covered with fresh-looking white bandages, hiding it from his eyes. Gently pressing it, however, sent another ball of pain shooting up his spine like it had been fired from a musket.

The door opened. Looking towards it, Connor froze mid-poke.

The grey-haired figure of Haytham Kenway stood in the doorway, similarly still. Strangely, he was not wearing his usual dark blue coat and cloak. Instead he was only in his waistcoat and shirt. Not even his favourite hat was on top of his (also) unusually mussed hair. For one long moment, the
two of them just stared at each other.

Haytham looked away first, breaking the spell that had fallen over them. Shutting the door carefully and firmly, he turned back to Connor and folded his hands behind his back, standing stiffly at attention.

Connor let his arm drop back to his side. His mind buzzed with questions. Why was his father here? And where was 'here' for that matter? The last thing he remembered clearly was slumping against the wall of the hallway, the corpse of the last Assassin leaking brains all over Uncle William's carpet.

The sound of Haytham clearing his throat pulled Connor out of his thoughts. Flinching guiltily, he turned to look at his father.

Resembling a stalking cat in front of a trapped mouse, his father smoothly strode across the room towards him, stopping at the edge of the bed and simply looking down at him with narrowed eyes.

"Well," he said, "you certainly managed to get yourself into a lot of trouble for being in the middle of nowhere."

Connor twitched and shrank back into his pillows.

"I did not go looking for it -" he protested weakly.

"But you found it all the same." His grey eyes still fixed on Connor, Haytham continued, "Young Miss McCarthy informed me of the little plan that you cooked up; tell me, did you really think so highly of yourself that you thought yourself capable of fighting three master Assassins at once?"

"I don't -"

"And if so, what on earth made you think that that moment in particular was the best point in time to prove it?"

"I didn't!" Connor cried, sitting up with his cheeks flushed. "I didn't do it for fun, or to test myself! I did it because there was no other way!"

Then pain stole Connor's breath away, so much that he couldn't even curse. He had forgotten about his injury. Sinking back down, he was surprised to find himself caught by gentle hands. Looking up, he saw his father, leaning over him with a stormy look in his eyes. Connor could feel the warmth of his large hands on his back and cupping his head. Delicately, Haytham lay him back down. The gentleness of his hands, though, was at odds with the cold sternness on his face.

"Tell me," he said, "what precisely gave you the impression that risking your life was necessary?"

Connor swallowed at the sub-arctic chill in his voice, but rallied as best as he could. "Uncle William's injury had become infected; I judged that out of the three of us I had the best chance of surviving playing bait to the Assassins -"

"And why did you judge that Johnson needed a doctor right then?"

Connor stuttered slightly. His father, questioning the necessity of treating a member of the Templar Inner Circle? Was this truly his father? If he hadn't been in so much pain already, Connor would have pinched himself.
"H-he had been fine in the morning when we first checked his bandages," he said slowly, keeping an eye on his visibly angry father, "but by the time we checked them again in the afternoon, there was pus. The infection was advancing too quickly, I knew that if I waited then he would have likely died."

"You did not know, Connor," his father corrected, "you guessed -"

"Would you have preferred to have a dead member of the Inner Circle?" Connor snapped, frustration bursting forth from him. "What is done is done -"

"Yes Connor," Haytham snapped back, his cheeks reddening and voice rising in anger, "I would have preferred that; far better than you captured by the Assassins or dead on the forest floor!"

Connor stared up at his father's flushed face, stunned. Growling, his father stood back up and turned away, beginning to pace the room.

"Did you even pause to think," he snarled, "of what could happen if you were caught? What did happen? Gutting you was only one of the things that they could have done to you! Assassins will kill you for the slightest bit of resistance. -"

"Rake'ni, please!" Connor cried. "I knew the risks, but I thought that my knowledge of the land would allow me to avoid a direct fight! I nearly did, if that mercenary hadn't surprised me -"

"But he did, and you were nearly killed -"

"Why are you so upset?!" Connor knew that his face was red with frustration, and he could feel the tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. "I was trying to do what I thought you would want me to do!"

His father whirled around and stalked back to the bed, his face equally as red. Connor couldn't help but tense at the thunderous look on his face, bracing himself for the slap that was surely coming. But his father didn't slap him. Instead, he bent over Connor and wrapped his arms tightly around him, one hand snaking up to tuck Connor's head under his chin.

"You stupid, stupid boy," he said, a strange undercurrent of emotion in his voice, "How on earth could you think that taking such risks was what I would have wanted?"

Oh.

Oh.

His hands trembling, Connor fist ed his hands in his father's waistcoat as just what he was saying hit him. Haytham was not angry at him for failing to fight off the Assassins. He was angry because Connor had to in the first place. Connor swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump that had suddenly risen up in his throat. "Rake'ni," he whispered, like when he had been small and afraid and his father had let them sleep together, "rake'ni, it is okay. I am okay."

Haytham's grip tightened around him, almost to the point of pain.

"It is not 'all right'," he growled, "they attacked you. They hurt you." Connor could feel his anger in the fine trembling of his body. "They will pay for this."

"But I survived," Connor said. Clumsily, careful not to pull his injury, he rubbed his father's upper
arm in lieu of being able to reach his back. "I am alive, and you do not have to worry."

"Don't have to worry - Connor," he said, drawing back and looking down at him with his brows drawn together, "your intestines were hanging out of your body! If that Wilkinson boy hadn't been there -"

"Clipper!" Connor's eyes widened as he remembered the other boy. He looked up at his father in a panic. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine, not a scratch on him," his father said, then hesitated. "I've been having some of our men talk to him about what he did to defend you," he admitted.

Connor relaxed slightly. Good. While he remembered the other boy hadn't been physically injured, he knew that it took quite a lot to work one's way up mentally to killing someone. He had been trained towards that since he was a young child. Clipper, for all his hunting experience, had never fought to the death with another person.

"But," his father said, sitting down on the edge of the bed while still somehow not letting go of Connor, "we are getting off topic. I believe that we were talking about why you felt it necessary to take such a risk in racing Assassins through the treetops."

Connor flushed slightly, but didn't try to draw away. After the winter where they had barely spoken to each other, he could not help but enjoy the physical contact with his father. It felt like he had forgiven him already, despite his words. He wanted nothing more than to stay like they were, holding each other like they had when Connor was a child. The smell of his father's cologne and the soap that he preferred filled his nose, transporting him back to that time where they read together in front of the fire.

But they could not stay like that forever, despite the warm memories it conjured. With great reluctance, Connor drew back slightly and licked his lips, wondering where to start. His father shifted slightly to allow him that, and something hidden down the front of his waistcoat shifted. The warm sheen of the green pendant that he or Connor always wore gleamed from his chest, and a memory bobbed to the surface of his memory, along with the promise that he had made to himself, several months ago.

"Consus," he whispered to himself. His father raised an eyebrow.

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"Father, before we go through what happened," Connor said, looking up, "I saw Consus again. While Clipper was trying to help me. And it reminded me of something else, that I wanted to tell you, before the McCarthy siblings and everything happened."

His father frowned slightly, but the mention of Connor's mysterious imaginary friend had him gesturing for Connor to go on. Heartened, Connor continued to speak.

"My people, we have a manhood ceremony that everyone has to go through before they are considered to be men. But to do that, we had to look into a glass orb, that was carved with these strange lines." Connor bit his lips and tried to stamp down on the guilty feelings that rose up in mentioning his tribe's sacred treasure. He had to tell his father, else the story would make no sense. And his father would not harm his tribe for such things!

"It was supposed to give me a vision. And it did, but not in the way that I think it was supposed to."
The Garden was as beautiful as always, gently guided and trimmed so that it looked overgrown and unplanned, kept in hand by a thousand hands. Its pale night-blooming flowers were wide-open and filling the air with their sweet, heady scent. In the distance, the soothing burble of a creek could be heard.

And yet, He thought as he gazed upwards at the stars shining through the panes of glass that made up the ceiling, he still found himself feeling uneasy. Like the peace that he found in the Garden usually was merely the calm before the storm.

Someone had broken into his labs the other night. And while nothing was taken, it was clear that someone had gone through his notes on the newest batch of the humans. This new line was supposed to be less likely to contract infections in their appendixes, nothing earth-shattering, just something that took time and experimentation. Even if it was used by That Bastard, it was unlikely that it would damage His own business. Still, the mere fact that someone was capable of breaking his encryptions and entering His private labs was troubling.

But he would look into such things tomorrow. For tonight was a night of celebration, not worry. His daughter was turning sixteen, and that was a happy occasion after all of the troubles that they had had together.

"Father."

Ah, speak of the devil. He turned and smiled at his daughter, standing on the observation platform behind him, her little friend Adam beside her like always.

"Yes, Eve?"

His daughter shifted slightly, looking away. He frowned. Now why did she look so sad and nervous, on today of all days? Normally she was bouncing around with excitement at this point, begging Him to come to dinner and open presents with her.

Stepping forward, He gently tipped her head up to look Him in the eyes. Her gaze, however, slid to the side and refused to meet His.

"What is wrong?" He asked, a curl of unease winding through Him.

"Father," she said, still not looking at him, "I saw something - disturbing, last night. And I wanted to talk to you about it."

He stroked her jaw gently with His thumb, trying to look reassuring.

"I went into your lab last night," she began haltingly. "I was curious about what you had been talking about with Master Aita and Mistress Juno. And I saw -"

She suddenly cut herself off, biting her lip. He went back through the contents of the lab mentally. What was in there that could have disturbed her so greatly? All that should have been in there were his notes and experiments, nothing disturbing.

Adam reached out and gently touched her back. She glanced over her shoulder at him, and He could feel her draw strength from his presence underneath His hand. Breathing in deeply, she fisted her hands in her dress and visibly steeled herself to continue.

"Father," she asked, an almost pleading tone to her voice, "why was there a cut-open baby on your table?"
A baby -? Oh, she meant that human infant he had been trying out the new implants on. Damned mutations had been stripping his humans of the control neurons and it was repugnantly wasteful to have to scrap entire lines. The implants were supposed to replace the control neurons quickly and easily when such things were noticed, but the human infant had been oddly listless, and then that emergency out at one of the plantations had happened...

"Oh, I am sorry, sweetie," He apologized, shifting his hand so that he could stroke her neck, "I know it was careless of me, but I was in a hurry and didn't have time to clean up."

Her forehead wrinkled and she seemed to stare up at him, an unfamiliar emotion on her face.

"Clean up?" she asked.

He blinked. What else could she be disturbed by? The human infant had bled quite a bit, after all, and it had gotten everywhere. For someone who was raised surrounded by nothing but beauty and cleanliness, there was no doubt in His mind that that was what had disturbed her so greatly.

"Yes, clean up," He said. "I just got a call halfway through dissecting it about an emergency out on one of the plantations."

"It?"

He paused. The look on her face had deepened.

"Is that what that little boy was to you? An 'it'?" She was trembling underneath his hand. "Y-you, how -" her mouth opened and closed, as if she could not find the words to express herself.

"Dear-" He began, pulling her close for a hug.

"I'm not your dear!" she snapped, shrugging off His arm and taking a step back. Her eyes were shining under the moonlight, her hands clenched into fists by her side. "And you're not my father. Someone like you doesn't deserve that title!"

It was as if His tongue had been turned to clay. What was this, He thought, as she turned and strode away with Adam at her heels, her back stiff and shoulders squared. Where had this come from? He wanted to chase after her, demand what this was about. But for some reason, He couldn't move. His arm hung in the air by His side where she had shoved it. All He could do was watch her disappear into the hallway, the door sliding shut with a final-sounding whumph.

"And it was just so strange, Rake'ni," Connor concluded. "I knew who I was at the time, but I was also the person, too. I knew what he was feeling, but like I was reading it off of a page. It was just - strange."

Haytham was not quite frowning by the time Connor ended his story.

"And there were no aftereffects from seeing this?" he asked.

Connor squirmed. He hadn't wanted to tell his father, but -

"I had a fit," he said quietly. "While the vision was going on, apparently I fell to the ground and started to shake for a while. Then I lay still and didn't respond to anything." Unconsciously, he fiddled with the covers. "It was very frightening for everyone, apparently."

At the first mention of the fit, his father's eyebrows had shot up to his hairline. They stayed there as
he stared Connor down. "And you didn't think," he drawled, "that mentioning that you had a fit was important?"

Connor winced. "I felt fine afterwards," he said, "just a little dizzy. And even after that the dizziness was gone by the time we were eating dinner." Momentarily, he considered mentioning how he couldn't remember anything of that day before the vision, but discarded it as quickly as it occured to him. His father was worried enough about his fit and the injuries he had gotten from the Assassins; he didn't want to see his reaction to memory loss.

His father sighed beside him, drawing him out of his thoughts. Looking over, he could see that the older man was pinching the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache.

"Alright," he said, "that was - is, very interesting. Certainly something to be properly considered. But we still have to discuss our original worry, as to why you felt it necessary to play the bait to three master Assassins -"

Connor's stomach growled. He could feel his cheeks reddening under his father's incredulous gaze, and looked back down at his hands, that had started to fiddle with the covers.

His father's hand gently lay on top of his hands, stilling them. Looking up from under his eyelashes, he saw an oddly tender look flash across his father's face as he looked down on him.

"But," he continued, "I suppose that it can wait until after lunch." His thumb stroked along Connor's wrist soothingly for a moment, then stilled. Standing up, Haytham briefly patted himself down, straightening his clothes, before heading towards the door. He paused just as he lay a hand on the doorknob and turned back towards Connor.

"By the way," he said, forcibly casually, "before you ask, both of the siblings are fine, as is Master Johnson." He raised his eyebrows at him meaningfully.

Connor flushed again and ducked his head, accepting the mild rebuke. "I am glad to hear that," he mumbled. "Will I be returning to Mount Johnson after I recover then?"

His father snorted and opened the door. "Son," he said, "you never left Mount Johnson. I came to you." And with that, he slipped out of the room, leaving a gaping Connor behind him.

It took weeks to get from New York to Mount Johnson. How long had he been unconscious?
As the carriage rocked back and forth as they rattled down the road, Kanen'to:kon felt increasingly like he was about to throw up.

He was going to Boston. One of the colonist cities.

In the the four years of training at the Davenport Homestead, nothing had prepared him for such a thing. Oh, they had gone to the small villages and towns that dotted the countryside; visited isolated farms that relied on the Assassin fleet for trade. But they had steered clear of the major ports and cities. Mentor Davenport had said that they Brotherhood was simply stretched too thin to have novices underfoot in their main areas of operations. Mister Faulkner, who had done his best to make sailors of them all, had agreed, and added that it was more for the safety of the novices than anything else, as Templars loved to attack those that could not fully defend themselves.

But right now, Kanen'to:kon was desperately wishing that he had some more experience to draw on. The looks and whispers that he had drawn even in those small towns had been uncomfortable; he could not imagine what it would be like in such a densely populated place as Boston.

Well. He could, actually. He just really wished that he couldn't, that was all.

A touch to his hand drew him out of his anxious spiral of dark thoughts.

"Don't worry," Aveline said, rubbing the knuckles of his hand with her thumb, "Mistress Scott is a kind woman, truly."

"It is not Mistress Scott that I am worried about," Kanen'to:kon murmured. "It is everyone else."

Aveline sighed, and for a moment, he felt guilty. He knew that his bouts of anxiety and worry could be very annoying at times. Certainly, the other novices back at the Homestead hadn't hesitated to let him know, whether with words or passive-aggressive groans. But then he firmly stepped on those feelings. Aveline was not like most of the other novices. She had never gotten annoyed or angry when he told her of his worries, and in return, he had been a similarly sympathetic ear whenever one of her nightmares or fits had come upon her. They were similar that way; for the both of them, their worst enemies were themselves.

"Do you want to know what it was like, living with Mistress Scott?" Aveline asked, her voice light. "It might make you feel better."

Kanen'to:kon bit the inside of his cheek and nodded.

Leaning back in her seat, Aveline smoothed her dress before she began to speak.

"It took a while, for me to trust her," she said, her eyes becoming distant like they always did when she began to remember the time after she had been freed from her stepmother's will. "Really, everything she did just seemed to remind me of my stepmother. The way she walked, the way she talked. How she had people over at all times of the night to discuss secret business. Sometimes, I found myself waking up convinced that I had just dreamed escaping the Apple."

"But the difference was," she said, turning her head, "Mistress Scott noticed this. She saw that I was having trouble and took the time out of her day to talk to me, not at me like Madeleine did, and made sure that I could decide things, even if they were as small as what dress to wear or what to eat at tea, even when it took a lot of time. And when I became more comfortable, we spent even
more time together. She began to teach me how to fight properly, with a sword and pistol. How to hide in plain sight, how to charm people - all the things that a female Assassin has to know. And even when my fits," and her voice quavered a little on the word; she hated being reminded of the frightening waves of emotions that had swept through her, making it impossible for her to live surrounded by so many people, "even when my fits proved to be too much for her to control or hide, she sat me down and discussed my options with her; she did not just tell me one day that I would be moving out to the frontier."

"I suppose," she said, her gaze dropping to where their hands were still connected, "that what I am saying is that she may seem intimidating at first, but she is truly a kind and caring woman. I'm sure that she won't -"

The carriage came to stop, jerking them in their seats.

Around them, Kanen'to:kon could hear people moving about. Straightening out of his worried slump, he cursed the fact that he had allowed his insecurities to distract the both of them from what was going on around them. A twitch of his hand opened the curtains of the carriage a sliver.

Regulars. Kanen'to:kon's pressed his lips together. Glancing back towards Aveline, he saw that she was looking out of her window and looking equally grim.

Looking back out, he tried to count how many there were. It was hard to tell. They were all moving around the carriage in ebbs and flows like waves on the ocean, patting the horses, squinting at the wheels, shoving the few people around this early in the morning away from them with harsh, barked orders. Still, to Kanen'to:kon's admittedly untrained eye, it looked like this particular troop was bigger than normal. At least, bigger than the ones that could be found out on the frontier.

"Any idea why we were stopped?" Aveline whispered, keeping her eyes glued to the window.

"I have no idea,"Kanen'to:kon admitted. Then a thought hit him. "Do you think it is the Templars?"

Aveline frowned slightly, clearly thinking. "I don't think so," she said slowly. "This is a normal checkpoint, I think. Still," she murmured, sliding a stiletto out from her sleeve, "it cannot hurt to be prepared."

Kanen'to:kon nodded once, jerkily, despite her not looking at him, and pulled his knife out of his boot. It had been a present from Aveline after he had held the funeral for her father, and it had served him well during their training. He had even managed to kill an elk with it once. No other weapon he had could claim that.

When the knock on the door came as expected, neither of them flinched. Carefully placing a hand over the shiny blade of his knife, he saw Aveline hide the hand holding the stiletto by pressing it against her thigh.

"Bonjour, monsieur," Aveline murmured, fluttering her eyelashes at the unshaven and red-nosed soldier that had knocked. "What seems to be the problem?"

The soldier grunted and looked unimpressed. "Checkpoint," he growled, peering around her. Kanen'to:kon tried to look non-threatening; judging from the nervous tension that appeared around the man's eyes, he failed. "Gotta check everything and everyone that comes through. You got your papers?"

Kanen'to:kon tensed. Looking, he could tell that Aveline had tensed as well by the sudden squareness of her shoulders under her dress.
"Papers?" she said, her voice layered with false innocence. "I was unaware that I needed papers to move about the city."

The soldier looked unamused. "New orders," he growled. "To deal with recent attacks upon the Crown's men."

"Ah, well," Aveline said, "I am afraid that I have been out on the frontier for a while. I was unaware that such things were necessary."

"Sucks to be you," he said, "no papers means that you're going no further into the city."

"But we are meeting someone!" Kanen'to:kon burst out.

The man's face twisted into something ugly as he looked at Kanen'to:kon. "Shut it, monkeyboy," he snarled, "rules are rules in civilized society."

Kanen'to:kon scowled and squeezed the hilt of the knife tightly. Oh, if they were not surrounded by soldiers, how he would love to teach the man about how the Kanien'ke:ha dealt with such people!

The man's eyes flicked down and narrowed at him. Stepping back, he held up a hand.

"Men," he barked. Suddenly there were a lot of soldiers raising their guns and pointing them at the two of them.

"What is this?" Aveline asked, fury seeping into her tone. "We are cooperating!"

"Get out of the carriage, ma'am," the officer said. "It needs to be searched." His lips curled back in a sneer. "Can't be letting infestations enter the city."

Shit.

Kanen'to:kon's thoughts immediately jumped to the weapons packed away underneath the seats. Those would not be easily explained. But with the amount of guns pointed at them, they had no choice. Slowly and reluctantly, the two of them climbed down the little steps to the dusty ground.

Outside in the sun, Kanen'to:kon got his first glimpse of Boston. He was not impressed. The ramshackle buildings that surrounded them towered above him, that was true. Walkways and clotheslines were strung between them, connecting them like the few sweaty strands left on a man's head that were combed over in a feeble attempt to disguise their baldness. The few trees and plants that were around were weak and weedy looking, much like the few dogs that were also skulking around. Everything just looked run down and hopeless, like no one was taking pride in themselves. The contrast of the houses that Kanen'to:kon had seen at the homestead, whitewashed and clean, with the dirty and peeling facades that surrounded them was simply shocking.

A sharp shove to his shoulder made him stumble. Kanen'to:kon whipped his head around to glare at the soldier who had done it, only to be met by several stony glares from his friends.

"Gentlemen!"

The strident tones of a woman leapt across the square where they were stopped, making the first soldier suddenly stiffen and look over his shoulder. There, shouldering her way through the crowd that had stopped to watch the proceedings, was a tall older white woman in a soft yellow dress, her hair piled on top of her head and a hapless looking man scurrying at her heels. Each step was place firmly against the ground as if she had a grudge against it, and her face was like a dark thundercloud at night.
The soldier turned and straightened, tucking his hands behind his back. "Mistress Scott," he greeted. Kan'en'to:kon could see a trickle of sweat down his cheek. "I did not expect to see you today."

"Really?" Mistress Scott said, her voice dripping with enough scorn to flood a river, "even after I specifically came down to you to warn you that I would be having guests pass into the city? Guests that would not have their papers?"

"Mistress Scott, I was not aware -"

"Bullshit." Standing right in front of the soldier, nose to nose, she narrowed her eyes. "I told you everything. Even what their carriage would look like. You simply wished to throw your weight around because of last night!" She punctuated her words by jabbing a finger into his chest. "Now you let these two people go and let us get on our way! Before I lose my patience and complain to your superiors!"

The threat of bringing in a superior made the soldier shrivel up faster than a slug in salt. "Yes Mistress Scott," he said hastily, turning and gesturing for the soldiers crowding Kan'en'to:kon and Aveline to back away, "right away."

Kan'en'to:kon didn't need any encouragement. He was happy to climb back into the carriage and away from the stares of the colonists. Aveline followed, and surprisingly, after a short glare at the soldiers, so did Mistress Scott. The man following her climbed up beside the driver, who was looking rather ruffled, and patted him on the back. The sound of the muttering crowd was quickly muffled by the door closing, and the carriage quickly gave a jerk and began to move away.

"Damned Regulars," Mistress Scott grumbled. "They've really started to become a pain lately."

"What has happened to cause such rules?" Aveline asked, voicing Kan'en'to:kon's own unspoken questions. "There was nothing like this the last time I was here."

Mistress Scott sighed and shook her head. "It's a long story," she said, sounding tired, "and not one to talk about here. I will fill you and your friend in at dinner. But first -"

She leaned forward and placed a hand over Aveline's. "How have you been, dear?"

Kan'en'to:kon had known that the colonists were ridiculous about eating with their utensils. At the homestead, all he had been able to do was shake his head over the arguments about who had stolen who's fork. But staring at the dizzying array of sparkling cutlery in front of him, his mind boggled. How would you need so much simply to eat? What was wrong with a knife and your hands? Hesitantly, he reached out and grasped the second-smallest fork. Aveline kicked him under the table.

"That's the salad fork," she muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "Use the one closest to your plate."

Kan'en'to:kon flushed and did so. Across from him, Mistress Scott and the strange man that had followed her around were already tucking in with great appetite. As Kan'en'to:kon followed their examples, identifying the meat tentatively as duck (it was hard to tell under the strange, sweet sauce they had coated it with), he tried to keep from staring. But something about the man, with his beard and expensive-looking clothes, kept drawing Kan'en'to:kon's gaze back to him.

Once they had arrived at the large, whitewashed house, Mistress Scott had almost immediately
been pulled away from them by a small, nervous man dressed in clean but old clothes making Assassin signs with his hands. The other man from the checkpoint had followed Mistress Scott away, and then Aveline and him had been left there in the front yard to their own devices. They had spent most of the time before dinner getting unpacked and becoming used to what was to be their home while they were in Boston.

The room itself was small but pleasant, hidden up in what was actually a rather spacious attic. Despite the sloping roof, it still felt large due to the white paint that had liberally splashed around, coating it from the beams to the floorboards. Within the room itself were two small beds, a shared desk and an armoire that Aveline had immediately laid claim to. All in all, it was a lovely room. The only thing Kanen'to:kon could possibly think to complain about was the lack of privacy.

There was not even a curtain to divide the two sides of the room. And while after training together so often there was very little modesty left between Kanen'to:kon and Aveline, he still couldn't help but blush when she had shamelessly slipped into a soft green and white dress in front of him. His cheeks stained again as he recalled how she had needed his help to lace up the back. That close to her, he had been able to feel the warmth of her body on his hands, and it had given him a strange feeling in his stomach.

"So," said Mistress Scott, dabbing delicately at her mouth with a spotless napkin, "I assume that you have questions about today."

"A few," said Aveline softly, laying her cutlery down on her own spotless dish. With a jolt, Kanen'to:kon realized that he was the only one still eating. Hastily, he began to apply himself to the meal, keeping an ear on the conversation.

"Well," said Mistress Scott, lacing her fingers in front of her face, "for starters, I suppose I should introduce the man that was with me during that unpleasantness with the soldiers. This is William de St. Prix, an Assassin from France." The man inclined his head at the two of them gracefully. Kanen'to:kon, with his cheeks puffed out and filled with food, belatedly swallowed.

"And why is a French Assassin here, then?" he asked. He hoped that he hadn't sounded too rude. His English was still hit and miss at times.

The flat glance shot his way by St. Prix was not reassuring. "My family is not particularly prominent amongst the French nobility," he said with a thick accent, "so it was decided that I would be less missed should I go to the Colonies to help our brothers."

"The French Assassins very kindly agreed to send one of their own to help support us in Boston," Mistress Scott interjected. "However, many of those best positioned to help are also the most in the public eye. William was the best compromise possible."

"I see," Aveline said, nodding her head back at St. Prix. "It is nice to see another Frenchman, then. The both of us look forward to working with you."

"And on that note," Mistress Scott said, signalling for wine, "I suppose that I should fill you in on the situation in the city. It is why you were stopped in the first place, after all."

The wine was poured and the dinner plates cleared away before Mistress Scott spoke again.

"As you may have noticed," she said, swirling her wine in her glass, "things are rather...tense, in the city. So before I say anything else, I don't want either of you going anywhere without each other. Do you understand?" She looked over the rim of her wineglass at them sternly.

The two of them nodded, unwilling to argue with her stern tone. But something was bugging
"Why are things so tense, then?" The words spilled from his mouth despite himself. "That group seemed to be larger than the usual troop of soldiers."

Luckily, Mistress Scott didn't look annoyed. She merely flicked her glance over to him and nodded approvingly. "You have a good eye, Mr....?"

"Kanen'to:kon."

"...I will do my best to pronounce that, but no promises," she said. "In any case, that group was larger than usual. All patrols have nearly doubled in size, in fact. And it's for good reason." Placing her wine down on the table untouched, she folded her hands in front of her. "Several dozen regulars have turned up murdered in the city, with no witnesses or leads on who did the act. That has understandably made the Crown's forces rather nervous."

"Murdered?" Aveline said, narrowing her eyes. "How many would have to die to make them this nervous?"

"Over thirty, Madame de Grandpre," said St. Prix, "with more appearing every day despite the increase in patrol sizes. And, well," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "when the British crown gets nervous, it is the visibly different -" and his eyes flicked over their darker skin, "- that tend to suffer disproportionately."

"That's not to say that I have no faith in your skills, though," Mistresse Scott interjected, giving a warning look towards St. Prix. "I fully expect that two of you would be able to deal with anything a bunch of half-trained soldiers can throw at you. However, we are not so well situated that we can afford to play fast and loose with your lives. The Templars do not take vacations just because we are having trouble with another group."

"And for all we know, they are the ones behind these attacks to make things harder for us to operate." St. Prix muttered into his wine glass. He raised his hands defensively as Mistress Scott shot another glare at him. "It is a valid theory! The Templars have been known to twist the authorities against us in crackdowns! And our people in the slums have barely been able to move with all of the scrutiny going on."

"Be as that may, we still have no real proof of that! This investigation is far from over, and it does us no good to concentrate on the Templars to the exclusion of all other suspects!"

St. Prix seemed to choke on his spit. Scowling, he jabbed a finger at her. "You still think that the Sons of Liberty are behind this?! We have already -"

"Gotten nothing!" Mistresse Scott snapped. "We still have no one in their inner circle! Ergo, they could still be pulling the wool over our eyes! Just because Sam Adams is vocal against the crown you hate does not mean that he is your ally!"

St. Prix opened his mouth to argue some more, but she cut him off with a sharp gesture. "Enough, St. Prix!" she snarled, "I am the head Assassin in this city, not you!"

St. Prix sat back in a huff, but made no more argument. Mistresse Scott looked ready to pursue him anyways, but relaxed back after a moment and took a sip of her wine.

"Like I was saying," she said after swallowing, "we are currently investigating who's hunting the soldiers. And that is what I wanted you two for."
Aveline and Kanen'to:kon glanced at each other. Silently, an agreement passed through them. "Why us? We are not even full Assassins yet -"

"But you are still warm bodies," Mistress Scott sighed. "I will be honest with you two. The Templars' attacks over the years have hit the Boston cell hard. The mere fact that there is still one is a testament to the Brotherhood's tenacity. But currently, we simply don't have enough warm bodies to continue normal operations and investigate these happenings. And that is where you two will come in."

Understanding flowed over Kanen'to:kon like a gentle wave. "We are to free up some of your Assassins to concentrate on the investigation," he said slowly. Mistresse Scott smiled at him tiredly.

"Exactly," she said, taking another sip of her wine. "I'll tell you who you'll be replacing in the morning. Until then, though," she said, raising her glass, "how about we concentrate on enjoying this wine, eh?"
The next morning, Kanen'to:kon and Aveline found themselves assigned to walking around the main fish market of Boston, listening for juicy gossip that would help the Brotherhood. Apparently, before they had arrived, Mistress Scott had been forced to assign a full Assassin to do this every day!

Kanen'to:kon couldn't see how they would have been able to stand it. He and Aveline had only been walking around for three hours and he wanted to jump into the harbour out of boredom.

Because Kanen'to:kon had arrived to the city with only his hunting clothes, Mistress Scott had been kind enough to strong-arm St. Prix into lending a few of his clothes to him to help him blend in better. Dark pants, a white shirt and a dark red waistcoat had been handed to him that morning, along with a long, dark brown coat to cover it all. He had tried to give him a plain white cravat to wear as well, but Kanen'to:kon had refused; Ratonhnhake:ton's tie was good enough for him, even after two years. Still, with his long braids and dark skin, Kanen'to:kon was unsure as to how helpful the clothes actually were. Certainly, people were still staring at the two of them as they pretended to browse the wares available in the various stalls.

Sighing, Kanen'to:kon slumped back against the wall of the tavern and crossed his arms. Just a few feet away, Aveline delicately plucked and inspected apples from the merchant's basket, a dark woven basket hanging carelessly from her fingers. She was wearing a plainer version of the green dress that she had been wearing last night, this one in a dark blue, and her hair was neatly caught up and curled underneath a similarly coloured hat. She, unlike Kanen'to:kon, seemed to be enjoying herself.

The sunlight seemed to fall just so, illuminating the sheen of her hair and the gentle curve of her lips as she answered the stall's owner. Handing over a few coins, she turned and picked up her skirt to keep the hem from trailing in the dirt and made her way over to him, her hips swaying gently.

"Anything?" Kanen'to:kon asked.

Her lips twisted slightly, a mocking smile making its way across her face and not reaching her eyes. "Well," she drawled, fishing one of the apples she had just brought out of her basket and handing it to him, "apparently a mister Grantham's wife has been cheating on him with a butcher, there's rumours that his neighbour's wife's child isn't her husband's, and his rival stall's supplier's had a bad case of mealworms in his fruits."

Kanen'to:kon grumbled and bit into the apple. It was just slightly too sweet for him, but his stomach had not been filled since sunrise and it needed the sustenance. Holding out his arm for Aveline to take, they continued on their way, promenading around the market in slow and steady circles. If this was what it was going to be like for the rest of their time here in Boston, Kanen'to:kon was sure that he would go mad.

The people of the city swirled and eddied around them like water in a stream. A dizzying array of
noise and smells, of shouted deals and spilled beer, assaulted them from all sides. A fishmonger was claiming to have the freshest catch of the day, ignoring the flies that swarmed his goods. A street urchin was holding up a paper and shouting the news to the world, offering the deal of the whole paper for only a penny. Even the women were getting in on the fun, arguing over prices and protesting the soldiers that were stationed at the corner of every street -

Wait a moment. Kanen'to:kon had to force himself to not move his head and crane his neck. That had not been a woman's voice he had just heard. Judging from the tension that had suddenly appeared in Aveline's frame he was not alone in noticing what was going on.

Casually, the two of them changed their route, inching tortuously closer to the center of a knot of people where the voice had emanated from.

" - all of us getting punished just because a few of the lobsters couldn't take the heat isn't right!" a man was saying, much to the muttered agreement of everyone around him.

"T'ain't just, punishing indiscriminately like that!" said another. "S'like we ain't even British citizens! Why, my cousin got thrown into one of their prisons just the other day because he was out on the steps of his house after curfew, having a smoke!"

More growls and grumbles greeted this story, along with offerings of other, similar stories. Kanen'to:kon squeezed Aveline's hand in a pattern. Trouble was brewing, and he had the feeling that they were going to be having trouble soon. The little knot of grumblers had become a crowd, now, and it was not a happy one.

One man in particular knocked at Kanen'to:kon's shoulder as he passed by, not slowing or apologizing. He simply shot them a dirty look before deliberately turning back and hocking a large glob of spit on the ground. Glancing around, he saw that more angry glances were being thrown around. The crowd was becoming a powder keg.

Kanen:to'kon squeezed another pattern. Leave now, watch from further away? The answering press of her thumb against his showed her agreement to his plan. But just as they were turning to casually stroll away, they saw them.

Regulars. Heading right towards the crowd with their muskets already out.

The soldiers stopped just a few feet away from them, fanning out so that they could easily drop into position for firing. The officer leading them straightened his back, his mustache bristling.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted, his voice cutting through the crowd's chatter. "This gathering is against the law. Disperse now!"

"Aow, piss off, Captain Lobster!" someone shouted. A rumble of agreement ran through the crowd. "What you so afraid of, anyway?" shouted another. Kanen and Aveline shot looks at each other. From the way the crowd was moving, ebbing and flowing with its members shooting dark looks at the captain, it didn't take a genius to see that things were about to get ugly.

The officer's forehead began to shine with sweat. His eyes darted around, taking in the sheer size of the crowd. But still, he didn't back down. "Disperse!" he shouted. "This is your final warning!"

The people didn't seem to want to listen, though.

"What you going to do, then," screamed a woman, "start shooting again? Just like at the Massacre?!"
The howl that followed that chilled Kanen'to:kon's bones. A few members of the crowd began to move forward, screaming more threats and accusations. Aveline's fingernails dug into the palm of his hand.

It was definitely time to leave.

Then Kanen'to:kon saw the officer raise his arm, as if time had slowed down.

The crowd roared.

Aveline squeezed the excess water from her handkerchief back into the rain barrel, shaking a few of the excess droplets from her hands. Turning, she began to gently dab at the cut on Kanen'to:kon's throbbing head.

Licking his lips, Kanen'to:kon grimaced at the taste of the old blood. The fine clothes that St. Prix had lent to him were no longer neat and clean as they had been in the morning. Now they were torn and dirtied from the frenzied mob that had swarmed the market, attacking anyone wearing a Regular uniform.

By preparing his men to shoot, the officer back at the market had lit the candle in the powder store, to say the least. The crowd had moved like one of the great rogue waves Faulkner had spoken of during sailing training, an overwhelming force simply dragging the two of them along despite their struggles to escape. Knives, guns, even rocks were picked up and used as weapons as the screaming press of bodies had fallen upon the unfortunate soldiers and torn them to pieces as Kanen'to:kon and Aveline had watched in horror.

Finally, as the last few men were being beaten and stabbed, they had managed to squeeze their way just as reinforcements had arrived and narrowly avoid being shot. They had fled down the narrow alleyways as the cracks of the guns had echoed through the air behind them, their hearts pounding in their throats.

The riot had seemed to get every soldier in the city out of their barracks and prowling the streets, just looking for an excuse to attack. The entire city, it seemed, had gone mad with bloodlust. As they had tried to return back to Mistress Scott's house, they had been forced to turn back again and again as they found massacred bodies lying where they fell in the streets, their blood flowing down the cobblestones. Lynched soldiers and tax collectors had swung from trees, their battered bodies half-naked and pale, and entire troops had been running down those who were unlucky enough to be nearby.

Now, with the sun setting, they were slumped in someone's backyard, trying to catch their breath as guns continued to crack in the distance. Looking up at the red and orange sky with water dribbling down his temples, Kanen'to:kon wondered if this was what it was going to be like the entire time that he was in Boston. If it was, then screw the Star-Woman and screw the Assassins; he was heading back to the village as soon as possible!

"We need to keep moving," Aveline said quietly, pulling away from his forehead. Tiredly, Kanen'to:kon nodded. Struggling to his feet, he let out a gusty breath. Hopefully, he thought, his feet and legs aching from walking, this time they would at least be able to get back to Mistress Scott's neighbourhood before having to turn back.

Comfortably slipping his hand into hers, they tiptoed their way down the nearest alleyway. Aveline, her hair falling out of its neat curls, her fancy hat gone, peeked around the corner for Regulars. A quick tap on Kanen'to:kon's first two knuckles gave the signal for the all-clear. This little system had been thought up by them during their night training back at the Homestead.
Worried that they would not be able to make out the hand signals usually used by the Assassins for their silent communication, they and the rest of the novices had decided that one based on touch rather than sight would be better in their case. And while this system was not, perhaps, as varied as the other system, it was still damn useful in this sort of situation where they didn't dare try talking to each other in case of attracting attention.

Walking out of the alleyway, they kept their hands connected. Scanning the streets and rooftops for trouble as they went along, Kanen'kon felt as if his nerves were as taut as a strung bow. Even this far away from the docks, if he concentrated hard enough he was sure he could still hear the roar of the crowd as it continued to fight against the British soldiers.

What had caused such a thing? He knew that relations between the colonists and their European masters were tense - he had been firmly educated on the finer points of the colonists' perceived grievances before he was even allowed near the borders of Mentor Davenport's land - but even with the warnings that Mistress Scott had given them the previous night, he had had no idea that things had become so bad! The rage, and how quickly things had escalated into violence - his gut knew that that was not natural.

A loud French curse drew him out of his musings.

His head jerking up, he scanned around warily for the source of the sound. Nothing was immediately visually obvious, but a loud crash, as if something had been hurled against the ground, echoed from further on up the street.

Kanen'to:kon slowed down just as Aveline began to speed up. Unwillingly, and despite the fact that he outweighed the woman by quite a lot, he found himself getting dragged along, towards the sound. Keeping his mouth shut and his eyes glued on the area around him, he squeezed out a question to her.

Why are we heading towards danger?

Because if it's just a few soldiers, we can probably sneak past.

Kanen'to:kon pressed his lips together tightly. He personally did not like taking such a risk, but he could understand her thoughts on the matter. Running around as they had been doing was exhausting, both physically and mentally, and just sneaking past some soldiers instead of turning around was very tempting. Hopefully, this would work.

As they turned the corner, his heart leapt a little. It was a smaller group than usual - rather than close to twenty men, it was the more usual ten or so men. What looked to be the captain of the group was standing with his sword unsheathed, half of his face covered with a sheet of blood and twitching his blade like he was itching to sink it through someone's chest. The rest of his men looked similarly beaten up and twitchy. Their uniforms, never all that clean or well put together, were positively ragged and stained with dirt and other things. They jeered and jostled amongst themselves, menacing the man forced to kneel at their feet, his belongings smashed to pieces around him.

The man did not seem to be happy with this turn of events. The door to what was presumably his home looked like it had been smashed off of its hinges. It hung precariously in the doorway by a single hinge, splintered and dirty. Clothing and broken pieces of furniture lay carelessly around him, clearly dragged out of his house to be destroyed for some strange reason.

"So, troublemaker," the captain sneered, "I see that you've managed to hide the evidence of your wrongdoing quite well. I suppose that it makes sense that a criminal would be so experienced with
"You fils de pute!" the man roared, starting to get up from where he was kneeling on the road, "I am no -" A sharp crack across his face with the butt of a rifle cut him off.

Snarling, he spat out a glob of blood in front of him, just splashing in front of the officer's boots. Even from where they were standing, hidden in an alleyway, Kanen'to:kon could see how the officer's eyes narrowed.

Lazily, the soldier flicked his sword out and pressed its point to right underneath the man's chin, forcing him to look up or get stabbed. A drop of blood welled up and streaked down the front of his throat.

"That," the officer growled, "was a mistake." Rearing back, he raised his sword arm and began to swing it down, clearly aiming to cut the man's throat.

Kanen'to:kon would never, for the rest of his life, be able to explain why he had done it. Neither would Aveline. It made no sense, after all. Jumping into a fight with ten men, all of them armed and tense from the violence that the city had been plunged into since that morning, when they were already exhausted was simply stupid, and back at the Homestead they would have been smacked upside the head by Heiman for daring to even suggest doing such a stupid thing. But as his knife ripped through the spine of the first man in front of him, Kanen'to:kon wasn't thinking about any of that. Instead, he was thinking about the bodies he had seen back at the market, shattered and bloody from both the shots of the soldiers and the knives of the people. They had laid where they had fallen, limbs sprawled and eyes glassy as flies crawled all over them. And something in him, not his heart or his gut or any physical organ, rebelled at the thought of seeing even one more body like that.

So with his nerves jangling, he and Aveline smashed into the soldiers surrounding the Frenchman, cutting through them like a sharp knife through a deer pelt. Two fell to Kanen'to:kon's knife and three to Aveline's stiletto before they were able to react.

Ducking under the officer's hastily reversed swordswing, Kanen'to:kon sank his blade into the other man's gut, ignoring the hot wet feeling of blood spurting out and coating his hand. The man's mouth opened up in a oh of shock, his eyes wide, but Kanen'to:kon didn't waste time staring. A quick move to the side, a kick to the knee and he ripped his knife free and slit the man's throat as he was falling to the ground.

To the Regulars' credit, they were brave. Rather than running as they saw their numbers reduced by more than half in a few seconds, they raised their muskets and charged at the two of them, shouting incoherent slurs on their parentage and skin colour. Unfortunately for them, bravery did not overcome skill, and they soon joined the others on the ground.

His heart pounding in his ears, Kanen'to:kon sheathed his knife after quickly wiping it off on one of the men's coat. The Frenchman was still kneeling on the ground where he had been before the fight. Now, though, rather than narrowed in anger, his eyes were wide with shock.

"You," he stammered as Aveline knelt down behind him to cut his bonds, "you killed them. All of them."

Kanen'to:kon paused and looked carefully at the man. He hadn't thought that the man would be frightened by such a display of force, with his earlier defiance, but if he was -

Kanen'to:kon was stopped from finishing that thought when the man slammed into him, squeezing
him tightly in a hug and grinning.  

"Hah hah!" he laughed, the corners of his eyes wrinkling, "Finally! It is about time someone stood up to those simonaques! Greedy sons of bitches have been harrassing me for weeks, trying to find something to string me up for!"

Wheezing, Kanen'to:kon just barely managed to wriggle free of the man's surprisingly strong grip. "This is not the first time you have been troubled?" he asked, coughing discreetly into his fist.

"Non," the man said, gleefully kicking the nearest body. "They've been bothering me for months, demanding my money. I suppose that riot down at the docks just gave them the excuse that they were looking for to get rid of me permanently."

Placing his hands on his hips, he turned back to look at the two of them.

"Let me treat you to a meal!" he said, "I am a cook - it is the least I can do for my saviours!"

"Oh, no," Aveline began, laying a hand on Kanen'to:kon's arm, "we're trying to get back home -"

"Nonsense!" the man said cheerfully. "You two look exhausted. Stay with me the night, and you can set out in the morning!"

Kanen'to:kon gnawed his lip. The idea was tempting. Tiredness had seeped into his frame from the day, and he could see the fine tremor in Aveline's hands that showed that she felt similarly. And they had been spending most of the day walking around already...

The growl of his stomach settled the matter. It was embarassingly loud, but the Frenchman simply grinned at it.

"It seems that your stomach has already decided," he pointed out, still grinning. "Help me get rid of these bodies and then I will start making dinner."

The two of them glanced at each other, and Aveline acquiesced with a rueful grin. "I am rather hungry," she admitted. "What is your name anyway, stranger?"

The man smoothed the white kerchief that he had tied around his head. "Stephane," he said, "Stephane Chapheau."
Stephane, despite obviously being a rabble-rouser, turned out to be an excellent host. Even with his house in shambles after being sacked by the soldiers they had just killed, he still managed to scrape together enough to give them a fine meal of soup, bread and a little cheese. He was clearly an excellent cook, if nothing else.

He was also quite chatty. He happily told Aveline and Kanen'to:kon everything that had been going on in the city, in greater detail than even St. Prix and Mistress Scott had managed. By the end of the night, when they were lying down for sleep, Kanen'to:kon felt almost as if he had known the man for his entire life. And in the morning, as he sent them off with a bit of bread for their breakfast, he had clearly felt the same, extracting the promise to come and meet him again at his workplace the next week.

However, Mistress Scott did not seem as pleased as Kanen'to:kon felt by the time they had returned back to the safehouse.

"Where have you been!?!" she said, her voice cracking like a whip. As soon as they had walked through the door, a servant had appeared at Aveline's elbow and begun to guide them towards the study, his eyes bugging out of his sockets and his face pale. With the way Mistress Scott had been imitating a summer thunderstorm rolling in when they had come in, Kanen'to:kon didn't blame him.

Slapping the papers she had been looking through down on the desk, she rose from her chair and began to stalk towards the two of them. Her hair was not in its usual coif, instead neatly braided and hanging over one shoulder. Neither was she wearing her usual dress; instead she had on a dressing gown, and that combined with the dark circles under her eyes sent a jolt of guilt through Kanen'to:kon. She hadn't slept last night, he realized. Most likely because of him and Aveline still being missing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Aveline bite her lower lip, and knew that she had come to the same conclusion.

Stopping in front of them, Mistress Scott's nostrils flared like a dragon. Tucking her hands behind her back she straightened up and despite being shorter than him by a full head, Kanen'to:kon had never felt so intimidated.

"I sent you two out to listen to people at the market! It was not a hard assignment, and with your training you should have been able to escape that riot before it even started with no trouble!" For a moment, Kanen'to:kon was surprised that she knew where the riot had started, but it soon passed. Of course she knew. She was the Boston cell leader, it would be impossible for her not to know.

Continuing on, the older woman began to pace in front of them. "I would have definitely known if she knew where the riot had started, but it soon passed. Of course she knew. She was the Boston cell leader, it would be impossible for her not to know.

"I sent you two out to listen to people at the market! It was not a hard assignment, and with your training you should have been able to escape that riot before it even started with no trouble!" For a moment, Kanen'to:kon was surprised that she knew where the riot had started, but it soon passed. Of course she knew. She was the Boston cell leader, it would be impossible for her not to know.

"That is unfair!" snapped Aveline. "We are not the sort to do that sort of thing and Mentor Davenport would not have sent us if we were! Stop accusing us and let us speak!"

Kanen'to:kon flinched as Mistress Scott's burning gaze turned to stare at Aveline. "Well then," she said, the ice in her voice contrasting with her heated gaze, "tell me what has been going on with
you two."

"We tried to return, but found ourselves constantly turned back by soldiers," Aveline explained, seemingly unaffected by their teacher's gaze. "Eventually, we were offered shelter by another victim of the soldiers. We decided to stay the night as there was still fighting going on."

This did not seem to fill Mistress Scott with relief.

"Really?" she said, her voice still lashing like a whip, "So you just decided to trust this man that you had just met? That you knew nothing about? Our enemies -"

"Are most likely busy with dealing with the riots themselves!" Aveline interrupted. Kanen'to:kon flinched at how Mistress Scott swelled up, indignant. "The Templars are all about order, Mistress! This sort of thing is not their style, especially not Kenway's style -"

"Oh, and you have suddenly become an expert in the Templar Grandmaster's ways?" the older woman jeered, her eyes slits. She made a sharp gesture, like she was slicing through the air with her hand. "Never mind! You two are not leaving this house again until I believe your skills are up to par, understand?"

Aveline's chin rounded stubbornly. Quickly, Kanen'to:kon stepped closer to her and grabbed her hand, squeezing it in warning.

"Yes, Mistress Scott," he said, bowing his head obediently. "We understand perfectly."

That was a lie, of course. If they had understood perfectly, then they would not be sneaking out a week later to meet with Stephane Chapeau for a 'little get together with some friends'. His friends, who were apparently as big a bunch of rabble rousers as he was.

Kanen'to:kon just knew that this wasn't going to end well.

"Calm down," said Aveline, her face as serene as the summer sky and just as uncaring of his worries, "we will go meet Stephane. He will give us a nice dinner and introduce us to his friends. After dinner there will be wine, and I guarantee you that once the first bottle is cracked open no one will notice us slipping away. We will get back in plenty of enough time to avoid being found out by Mistress Scott. She won't even know that we were gone."

She finally finished adjusting her knives to her satisfaction and turned, flashing a smile at him.

"Simple and easy."

Sitting on the bed and wringing his hands, Kanen'to:kon wasn't so sure. "And what of the regulars?" he pointed out. "They have been out in even more force since the riots. You can barely walk down the street without hitting a checkpoint."

"We'll use the roofs."

"They are up there too."

"Not as many, now, as there were before." She was now tucking her hair up under a tricorn hat. Kanen'to:kon frowned and had to repress a shudder at the sight. It had been years since his vision, and still the sight of a tricorn hat triggered a deep wave of revulsion in him. But they wouldn't get their proper hoods until they were proper Assassins, and until then they had to make do with hats or go without. Yet another bit of colonial society that Kanen'to:kon didn't understand;
obsession with keeping certain people from wearing certain things.

"After how many were injured or killed in the riots, the officers apparently cannot spare the men to
guard the rooftops all over the city. I overheard one of Mistress Scott's visitors say that most roof
guards are only around the richer parts of the city now. And let's be honest; as kind as he was,
Stephane is far from uppercrust."

Her hat now tilted to perfection, she turned and sauntered over to him. Leaning over, she rested her
hands against his knees and promptly ruined her work by pressing their foreheads together.

"It will be fine, Kanen'to:kon," she said softly. "Now, we have to go if we want to meet him."

Her eyes were like large, sparkling pools. Kanen'to:kon really regretted how effective that was
against him.

Once they were at the meeting place, though, Kanen'to:kon felt a little more sure in turning to
Aveline and giving a flat 'hah' of disappointed triumph.

"That," he said, pointing down at the packed tavern, "is not just a little get together."

Despite the curfew and massive amount of patrolling soldiers, the tavern was packed with people,
some even spilling out of the door and into the street. Apparently, it had been one of the few to
escape the riots and the subsequent crackdown relatively intact. Pausing at the mouth of the
alleyway they were in, Kanen'to:kon scanned the people at the door, looking for the white cloth
that Stephane tied over his head. Aveline did so as well; the soft, eerie glow of her eyes was just
noticeable out of the corner of his eye.

"There," she murmured, the glow fading as she gestured towards the crowd. "He just came out."

Kanen'to:kon looked where she pointed. It took a moment for him to recognize the man; his usual
head covering was in turn covered itself with a raggedy-looking tricorn. He was laughing about
something, pointing towards the hat, and Kanen'to:kon wondered for a moment where exactly the
hat had come from. He hoped that it wasn't where he thought it was.

But before he could voice his concerns, Aveline was already striding across the road, ignoring the
stares she was getting from the other men hanging around the door. Kanen'to:kon hurried after her,
ignoring his own gathering of stares.

"Bon nuit, Stephane," she was saying in her usual purr as he reached the two of them. "I knew that
you had many friends, but I have to admit, I did not believe that there were this many."

Stephane's lips quirked into an odd, sly grin that didn't quite fit on his open and honest face.
"Friends, oui," he agreed, his eyes glittering. "But how about you come inside, so that I can treat
you to that dinner I promised the two of you, eh?" Placing a hand on Aveline's back, he guided her
into the loud and hot tavern, with Kanen'to:kon following.

Immediately, the roar of voices welled up, as if he had dove into a pool made up purely of people.
If the outside was crowded, then the inside was absolutely packed. People stood chest to chest,
barely able to move and shouting excitedly at each other. They sat on the steps to the upstairs of
the tavern and leaned over the railings to yell at even more people, gesturing wildly with flushed
faces and glittering eyes. The heat and noise from so many bodies and candles was suffocating.

Ahead of them, Stephane pushed and elbowed people out of the way unashamedly, leading them
up the stairs towards the main loft area. This part of the tavern, at least, was a little quieter, if still
very hot. A few small tables and chairs were there, along with some empty mugs. Stephane swept
them off a free table carelessly before gesturing for them to sit down.

Doing so, Kanen'to:kon looked around. Most of the tables up here were empty, actually, aside from the empty and not-so-empty mugs. The people standing around seemed to prefer leaning on the railings to better shout at the other people in the tavern to sitting at the table. In fact, there was only one other person at a table other than them. And short blond man, his hair thick and unbound and falling into his eyes as he nursed his drink.

"I am glad that you were able to make it, my friends," he said happily. "I only wish that you had gotten here a little earlier. Then I would have been able to introduce you to the main speaker tonight."

"The main speaker?" Kanen'to:kon asked as he sat down, his brow furrowing.

"Yes!" Stephane looked around exaggeratedly before leaning over to mock-whisper, "He is one of the leaders of the Sons of Liberty. Monsieur Sam Adams! He's been trying to organize the city to resist the occupation since the Massacre."

Oh no. Kanen'to:kon shot Aveline a look. At the very least, she looked similarly worried.

"We came here for dinner, Stephane," she said worriedly. "If this place is raided -"

Stephane waved her worries away with a casual gesture.

"Those lobsterbacks? Pah!" he laughed. "After the riots, they would not dare come down here! All hidden away in their little barracks, shivering in fear!" The gleam in his eyes was disturbing. Kanen'to:kon was beginning to rethink this friendship.

Just as the man was about to continue on, the noise downstairs suddenly quieted. Kanen'to:kon, his spine prickling, looked over to see a dark-haired white man in a dark blue coat standing on the bar.

"Ah, he is here!" said Stephane, his boisterous voice also quieted.

"Who is that?" asked Aveline. She moved closer to Kanen'to:kon until she was practically sitting in his lap, frowning as she peered down at the man, who was now gesturing for quiet.

"Who is that?" asked Stephane, sounding shocked and aggrieved, "Who is that? That is Sam Adams! The leader of the Sons of Liberty and," he said, leaning forward and wiggling his eyebrows, "a good friend of mine."

The way he said it made Kanen'to:kon think that he should already know the man. Thinking furiously and trying to ignore the scent of Aveline's hair, he thought over the various groups that Mistress Scott and Saint-Prix had talked to them about. No matter how hard he thought, though, the name Sam Adams wasn't familiar.

"The Sons of Liberty..." Aveline said speculatively.

Stephane rolled his eyes and huffed.

"You two are lucky to have me as your ami," he said. "The Sons of Liberty are the leading figures in the fight against the British occupiers! They've been organizing actions against the Lobsterbacks and their lackey tax collectors for months!"

Oh. Now Kanen'to:kon remembered. Saint-Prix and Mistress Scott had argued about them, the night that they had arrived. Looking over, he saw that Aveline had narrowed her eyes as she looked
at the man on the bar. He suspected that she remembered how Mistress Scott suspected Adams and his group to be behind the attacks lately.

If that was the case, he thought as he looked down on the lower levels of the tavern, then they were uniquely well-suited for getting more information on what, precisely, was going on in the city.

"Gentlemen," began Adams.

Almost immediately, he was drowned out by the hooting and hollering. Kanen'to:kon could see the men howling, men banging their tankards on their tables and stomping their feet. Grinning sheepishly, Adams gestured for them to quiet down. It took several minutes, but eventually everyone did to levels where Adams could be heard again.

"Gentlemen," he began again, looking around the room, "we have struck a great blow against our oppressors last week."

"Damn right," shouted someone amongst the press of bodies. "We sent those lobsters running scared!"

A roar rose again. More shouting and stamping. Kanen'to:kon wondered if they'd ever be able to get through this meeting before the sun rose.

Again, Adams gestured for quiet.

"Gentlemen, it is true that we have the soldiers on the run. But this is not the end. We must continue to put pressure on them, keep it up so that they cannot rest, cannot even move without our say-so! We must show our overlords in London that they cannot just march in on their own citizens and trample all over their rights!"

Even more yelling. Still half in his lap, Aveline caught Kanen'to:kon's attention and rolled her eyes. His lips quirked slightly. It was good to know that he was not the only person to be less than impressed by such rowdiness. Among his people, at least, such loudness at a meeting would not have been tolerated.

"We must continue to petition Parliament to respect our rights! We must continue to keep our ranks closed and strong! Do not allow these soldiers and tax-collectors to intimidate us! If we stay strong and stay together, we cannot be ignored!"

"Aye! And maybe we could make a few more examples of the lobsterbacks, eh!"

Kanen'to:kon was not sure why, but something about the voice that just suggested that sounded wrong. Leaning back casually, he scanned the room, trying to find who it was that had just spoken. A sea of bodies met his eyes, none standing out compared to the others. The rumble of the crowd, though, suggested that many were considering the speaker's words. A few chuckles showed that it was not an unpopular idea.

Adams held up a hand to stop the speaker in his tracks.

"No, my friend," he said, looking grave, "that will no longer serve our purposes here."

"And why not?" called out another voice. Kanen'to:kon could see how Adams' eyes skipped around the room, trying to find who had just spoken. He too tried to see the other man that had spoken. The same just plain wrong undercurrent was in that voice too. Feeling Aveline tense in his lap, he realized that she too had recognized the tone.
It was that of a man thirsty for blood.

Kanen'to:kon began to sweep the room for exits. He could remember the roar of the riots, only a short week ago. And even out at the Davenport Homestead, he had learned more than enough from the stories of Mentor Davenport and the other dark-skinned Assassins to be wary whenever such a tone entered the voice of a white man.

The crowd was growling again. More sounds of agreement were floating up to where the two of them were sitting. And looking over to where Adams was still standing on the bar, Kanen'to:kon was not surprised to see that even he was looking nervous.

"We have 'em on the ropes! Why should we not press further, push our advantage?"

"We could have them runnin' out of the city with their tails 'twixt their legs in a month!"

"Gentlemen," Adams began again, holding up his hands, "we cannot completely run the Redcoats from the city. Not yet. If they leave, they will be back, with even more soldiers. We walk a fine line now."

"Then we don't let any of them leave!" Yet another voice yelled out. Kanen'to:kon could practically hear the savage grin in his voice. The crowd was shifting downstairs, muttering. Cocking an ear, Kanen'to:kon could hear some of the men on the stairs.

"They're right," one was saying, gesturing with his pipe, "we already know where they are. Wouldn't be hard to trap them there and fall in."

"Adams has a point though," another said, "the King can just send more."

"Or maybe he'll finally take our complaints seriously!"

Kanen'to:kon swallowed. Things were definitely taking a turn for the worse. At the table beside them, their blond neighbour shifted nervously and tucked a strand of his loose hair behind his ear. Glancing back over the room, it looked like their neighbour and the man on the stairs were in the minority. A sea of eyes glittering with bloodlust in the dim light of the tavern.

Beside them, the blond man stood up. Something swung from his neck, catching Kanen'to:kon's eye.

A red cross.

Leaning over to Aveline far more casually than he felt, Kanen'to:kon tapped her knee to get her attention.

"I think," he said softly, "we should leave." Subtly, he jerked his chin in the direction of their now-leaving neighbour.

From the way her eyes briefly flashed gold, he could tell that she saw the same thing he had. With a quick murmured apology to Stephane (who was paying more attention to the crowd than them anyways), they slipped out behind the blond man into the cool night air.
Outside, the air had gotten cold enough for Kanen'to:kon's breath to fog in front of him like smoke from a campfire. They were deep into the night now, with the moon high above them and struggling to light the dark streets. Padding carefully along the packed dirt streets, Kanen'to:kon kept a light grip on Aveline's coat. With the lack of lamps in this part of the city, her special eyes were very important to their ability to follow the blond man.

The man himself walked overly casually away from the scene. Sticking his hands into the pockets of his coat, he whistled tunelessly as he ambled away from the pool of golden light that oozed from the tavern, only hitting one in five notes. His shoulders gave lie to this casualness, though. They were stiff and straight as a plank of wood. Combined with how he kept throwing glances over his shoulder, it did not take a genius to realize that he was worried about being followed.

The two of them accordingly took to the roofs.

As soon as the man turned the corner and was out of sight of the tavern, he broke into a run and quickly clambered his way up a wall. Following him along the rooftops, Kanen'to:kon tried to keep an eye on him, which was surprisingly hard. The man was excellent at shaking off pursuers; Kanen'to:kon was sure that if it wasn't for Aveline's special eyes, they would have lost him early on. As it was, though, they just barely managed to keep up with him. He danced along the rooftops, jumping from tree to roof to fence with enviable ease. Next to him, Kanen'to:kon felt like some lumbering, autumn-fat bear, just looking for the right place to rest. Beside him, Aveline mimicked the man's actions, resembling an eagle cutting through the air as they swooped after their prey.

Finally, though, the man began to slow. Keeping back accordingly, the two of them watched carefully as he began to hesitate, his blond head whipping around under the moonlight as if he was looking for something. Kanen'to:kon hastily ducked behind a chimney and peeked out.

Apparently satisfied that no one had followed him, the blond man dropped down the side of the house. Peeking over the side, Kanen'to:kon watched as he quietly rapped on the front door, looking around nervously and shifting from one foot to the other. Kanen'to:kon felt Aveline settle down beside him.

"Someone is reporting, I think," she murmured in his ear. Kanen'to:kon nodded slightly, keeping his eyes glued on the blond man as the door opened. Looking relieved, the man entered it, the door shutting quietly behind him.

"Time to follow, then," she continued, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Yes," Kanen'to:kon agreed, "I think it is."

Luckily, the room where the man was reporting was on the ground floor. Settling underneath the window where a single candle was sitting, Kanen'to:kon leaned back, ready to wait for as long as it
took to find out why the Templars had been at the Sons of Liberty's meeting.

"Sorry it took so long, Gillian," the man said, sounding sincerely apologetic. "I had to wait until everyone was stirred up enough that they wouldn't notice me leaving."

"It's fine," said a rich, throaty voice. "I just need to know what to tell the Grand Master when he asks about the Sons of Liberty."

Kanen'to:kon blinked. With how most of colonial society looked at women, he hadn't expected the man to report to one. Shifting so that he was on one knee, he risked peeking over the windowsill and through a crack in the curtains.

The room itself was an odd mix between spartan minimalism and typical colonial luxury. The walls were bare of the paintings colonists loved so much, but the chair and table were both well-carved, and even with his limited view he could see that the chairs were padded. The woman leaning over the paper-covered table was similarly luxuriously dressed. Unusually, she was still dressed as if she expected to leave the house, rather than wearing a robe and nightgown like Mistress Scott did when they spoke at night. It didn't take a genius to see that the dress she was wearing was expensive, either; the richness of its green was hint enough. When mixed with the sparkling jewellery at her neck and throat, it was a heavy hint that the woman was from the upper class that called Boston home.

Which just made her presence all the more puzzling. The neighbourhood that they were in was not the nicest, to be frank. Better than the slums, for sure, but hardly somewhere that upper-class women strolled around in. Kanen'to:kon bit his lower lip and sank back down to the ground, shaking his head slightly at the look Aveline shot him. He would tell her more when they returned to Mistress Scott's house.

"Adams is stirring the shit as always," the man said, "but I'm thinking that he isn't the main power behind this push for violence against the British."

"Oh?" said the woman. "Why's that?"

"You should have seen him when the crowd started to suggest pushing harder. He was nervous. He knows those riots have done a lot to bring attention to Boston; attention that the Sons can't afford. And the crowd's not listening to him anymore."

"Odd. He's usually the first to suggest violence."

"You could see it in his eyes. He was sweating. He's losing his grip on the crowds, and it's scaring him."

A rough, unladylike bark of laughter split the air. "Really then? Bastard deserves it; he's damaged our interests a little too much for my comfort."

"But if he's not pulling the strings anymore -"

"That just makes our jobs harder." The amusement faded from the woman's voice as quickly as it had appeared. The woman hummed. "You mentioned that people were suggesting more violence. Did you see anyone sticking out of the crowd?"

"No, actually." Kanen'to:kon could practically see the man's brow wrinkling. "It was the oddest thing. Someone, or several someones were throwing out suggestions and riling the crowd up, but whenever I tried to pinpoint them it was as if they didn't exist. I'd almost think that someone was throwing their voice."
"God damn it." Resignation. "And we can't do anything if we don't know who to silence. I don't want another riot, Fillian. I don't want a forest of gallows springing up in the city, and neither does the Grandmaster. The authorities want someone to blame, and they're getting antsy. Soon they won't care if someone's actually guilty; they'll just want an example."

"No one wants that, Gillian. I swear, everyone's doing what they can to defuse things. Who knows, maybe we could even approach Adams soon. Offer some 'help' with the crowds."

"No, that wouldn't work. That French bastard already has his claws into him, he'd get warned away. And that would be even if he listened to us in the first place. We are working with the British, after all."

"But surely he'd listen to reason. Violence isn't the way to earn the colonies' freedom from the English, he has to see that!"

"Fillian, I love you, but sometimes I swear you are worse than Clipper with your naivety." There was the sound of a hand being clapped down on a shoulder. "People like that, they get addicted to the crowds. It's like being worshipped. Adams isn't the key here, anyways. Its whoever's setting things up for the riots. If we find them, then everything will fall into place."

"But -"

"But nothing! You know I'm right, Fee," the woman said. Her formerly formal tone softened into something almost familial. "In any case, there's nothing more we can do now. I'll draft a letter for the Grandmaster. One to Master Johnson as well, he has a ship full of tea in the harbour that's no doubt a tempting target for St. Prix. We'll figure out where to go from here in the morning."

Looking over to Aveline, Kanen'to:kon could see his confusion mirrored in her face.

The Templars, concerned about violence? Working with the British made sense, what with their obsession with control, but being concerned with innocent people being hanged? Listening to the footsteps leaving the room and the door closing, Kanen'to:kon stood up and reached down to help Aveline up, his mind whirring with confusion. Brushing the dust off their knees, they turned to begin to sneak away.

Only to stop at the sight of someone standing at the end of the alleyway that they'd been sitting in. Someone in a hood.

Mistress Scott was still, sitting behind her desk with her hands neatly folded in front of her. There was no trace of anger on her face, no emotion at all. And it was far more frightening than anything else Kanen'to:kon had ever seen.

"Tell me," she said, her voice glacial, "what was it that I told you to do not even a day ago?"

Kanen'to:kon had to force himself to not bite at his lip in nervousness. He could feel Saint-Prix's presence behind him, a dark cloud of disapproval that mixed with Mistress Scott's own anger to form a fog of condemnation that filled the room, pressing against his skin until all he wanted to do was shrivel up into a little ball and die.

Risking a glance to his side where Aveline was standing, he felt envy shoot through him. She didn't look intimidated by the anger of her superiors. She was standing, her feet shoulder-width apart, back as straight as any soldier and looking Mistress Scott right in the eye.

"You said that we were not allowed to leave the house until you believed our skills were up to your
standards," she said crisply.

"Oh, so you did listen," Mistress Scott replied, arching one pale eyebrow. "If that is the case though, would you mind informing me as to why you then promptly decided to go out for a nightly stroll. In a city still calming down from the riots. Without telling anyone where you were going?"

Kanen'to:kon squirmed. "We were supposed to get back before you noticed we were gone," he mumbled. "And it was supposed to just be a dinner with Stephane."

Mistress Scott's gaze, which had previously been fixed on Aveline's defiant face, flicked over to Kanen'to:kon.

"Oh really?" she said, "Then tell me. If you were going to dinner, why is it that Saint-Prix found you two outside of a Templar safehouse listening in? That is a long way from dinner. Did you perhaps feel that you had something to prove to me? That if you did something impressive enough, I would rescind my rules?"

"If you would just let us speak, we would tell you how we ended up there and what we heard, Mistress," Aveline cut in. Kanen'to:kon was envious. She still didn't look the slightest bit intimidated by Mistress Scott's anger. Taking a step forward, she squared her shoulders.

"We did not start out with the plan to follow a Templar. It simply extended from the meeting with Stephane at the tavern he worked at. We went there expecting a quiet meal, but it turned out that there was a big meeting to talk about the riots. Sam Adams was there, and he seemed to be having trouble keeping the crowd under control. I could not tell who it was," she said, glancing over at Kanen'to:kon, "but someone kept suggesting that they should run all of the British soldiers out of the city. A lot of the crowd seemed to agree, and it was getting ugly again when Kanen'to:kon and I noticed that one of the people at the next table over had on a Templar ring."

"So you followed him," Mistress Scott said with a faint sneer.

But Aveline refused to be cowed.

"So we followed him," she agreed, "partly out of curiousity of why he was there, but also partly because things were getting ugly. But when he was reporting to his superiors, he said some odd things -"

"His superior?"

Behind them, Saint-Prix to a step forward. "A woman," he said, "with red hair. Gillian McCarthy. She helps run a Templar-affiliated business and has connections to the Grandmaster. Smart as a whip and ruthless in pursuit of the Templar's goals. I have been trying to corner her for months."

Aveline nodded. "That was the woman Kanen'to:kon and I saw there," she said. "She seemed to want to know if the Sons of Liberty were behind the violence in the city in the past week. The both of them seemed worried about it. McCarthy said something about reporting to the Grandmaster."

"Oh hell," Mistress Scott muttered, rubbing her forehead. "Wonderful. So that is a definite yes to the Templars having infiltrated the Sons of Liberty then."

"Well," Aveline hedged, "the man did not seem to be terribly close with Adams or anyone else there..."

Mistress Scott held up a hand. "Believe me," she said, "if I know anything about the Templar Grandmaster, the man you followed is far from the only spy he's set on the Sons of Liberty. The
news you carry though is worrying. If the Templars aren't the ones behind this sudden push of violence...

She shook her head. "But I'm getting ahead of myself." Looking at them steely-eyed, her eyebrows furrowed. "You still disobeyed me."

Aveline scowled. "Mistress," she began heatedly, "we were sent to assist you in Boston, not sit around and wait for you to watch us train and -"

Mistress Scott glared and cut her off with a sharp jerk of her hand. "My reasons my seem opaque to you two," she said, her cheeks flushing a blotchy red, "but I won't have another pair of novices' deaths on my hands! Not while I can help it!"

"Another?"

Kanen'to:kon regretted blurting that out the moment Mistress Scott’s gaze transferred over to him. He froze under her gimlet stare until she sighed and dropped it down to her desk. Leaning back, she began to rub her forehead again.

"Yes, Ganendoego," she said, all of the anger gone from her voice to be replaced with tiredness. "Another."

Letting her hand fall to her lap, she sighed. "Saint-Prix, you can leave if you wish," she said, "I know you've heard this story before." The man nodded and bowed slightly before slipping out the door.

"Listen closely, the both of you," she ordered, "because I don't like to tell this story."

Sharing a glance with Aveline, Kanen'to:kon obeyed.

"I came here in 1760 under orders to help Achilles keep a hold on the situation in the English Colonies," she began, "and upon arrival, I was put in charge of two particularly talented young novices name Hiram and Daniel." She paused before sighing again. "Unfortunately, as well as being very talented, they were also very full of themselves. With how stretched thin the Brotherhood was, no one had the time to properly put them in their place before I arrived. And I, in an attempt to undo all of the damage, went too far in the other direction, until they thought that they had to do something really impressive to get me to lay off of them."

"So they went and tracked down the Templar Grandmaster, Haytham Kenway. Breaking into his house while he was away one night, they were looking for papers as proof of their daring when they were surprised by the Grandmaster's son waking up and catching them. Then when the Grandmaster came home earlier than expected, they panicked and kidnapped the child, along the way drugging him. Unfortunately, the child had a bad reaction, and panicking more they brought the child to me. While I was chiding them, the child then disappeared."

"It was a mess. After that night, Kenway initiated a purge of the Brotherhood in Boston, and Hiram and Daniel's luck eventually ran out. They were captured and tortured by a Spanish Templar known as Father Perez. By the time he was through with them, all I was able to give back to their parents was a handful of charred teeth. It was an utter mess, and I swore that I would never let something like that happen again."

Blinking away the memories, she shook her head, straightening up. "So now you know the whole sorry story," she said, sliding back into a business-like tone, "and why I am against letting you two run wild through the city."
Aveline finally looked slightly ashamed. Rubbing her arm, her eyes skipped around the room. "Mistress," she said, "I am sorry about what happened. But we are not Hiram and Daniel -"

Again, Mistress Scot held up a hand. "Dismissed, the two of you," she said, a bit of tiredness leaking back into her tone.

They were quiet on their way back up to their room. Both of them were mulling over what they had just heard.

Hiram and Daniel. Two names that they had never heard before, and yet apparently had had such an effect on their mentor. Kanen'to:kon couldn't help but wonder at the heat it would take to reduce someone to just their teeth. Even when his village had burned all those years ago, the people that had died in the fires were still recognizable as people.

He also wondered at how Mistress Scott would think that he and Aveline were like that. So foolish as to believe that she was keeping them sequestered out of some belief that they were incompetent. He was no genius, that was true, but even he could see the way her hands had trembled when they returned after the riots, or how her eyes looked strangely far away in the week afterwards as she looked over their training. He had not known the names, but he had already known the story in his heart.

Closing the door to their room, he paused, his hand still on the doorknob. Aveline was standing in the middle of the room, her lips pressed together tightly.

"We are not Hiram and Daniel," she said, crossing her arms.

Kanen'to:kon was not quite sure what she meant by that, so he just nodded and made an agreeable sound.

Aveline seemed to take that as the starting horn of a race. With a low growl, she began to pace across the room.

"We are not them," she said insistently. "We are not the type just to run off in an attempt to impress someone. We merely went to have dinner with a friend - finding ourselves following that Templar was by chance!"

"I think that she knows that -"

"It is just so angering!" she whispered-shouted, ignoring him as she clenched her fists. "She is so afraid of losing us that she cannot see that we are not like those boys! We are not so overconfident that we think we can take the entire Templar Order on! She cannot live in the past."

She wheeled on her heel to look at Kanen'to:kon. Despite himself, he shrank back a little at the vehemence in her face.

"Kanen'to:kon," she said seriously, "Maybe we should hold a funeral."

For a moment, Kanen'to:kon just stared at her, uncomprehending of what she had said. A funeral? Then he made the connection.

And then he began to giggle, the tension leaving his body all at once.

Aveline's brows drew together, and she placed her hands on her hips. But the giggles proved to be infectious. Her stern look cracked slightly, then all at once, and soon the two of them were
laughing together.

Looking at her, her eyes shining with mirth, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes as she struggled to get herself back under control, Kanen'to:kon felt a jolt of something strange run through him. Something that was at once familiar and strange.

Eventually, though, their laughter faded. Their ribs aching, they began to get ready for bed and what little sleep that they would get before they would be called on in the morning. Aveline fell asleep quickly, her breaths evening out. Kanen'to:kon, however, did not find himself so lucky.

That feeling. What had it been?
Breakfast the next morning was an awkward affair.

After the emotional story the previous evening, Kanen'to:kon was not sure where to look. Aveline had dealt with it by keeping her gaze glued to her plate as she steadily worked her way through sausage and eggs, but Kanen'to:kon, a much faster eater, quickly found himself unable to follow her example. So as he carefully mopped up the last little bits of grease with a scone, he let his gaze bounce restlessly around the room.

Mistress Scott seemed unaffected by the tension in the air. She was as neatly dressed in the colonist style as ever, her hair carefully braided and pinned up, and no evidence of a lack of sleep from last night had left a trace on her face. She was lingering over a cup of tea, her own meal efficiently attacked and devoured in only a few minutes.

At the other end of the table was Saint-Prix. Unlike the rest of them, he apparently preferred the bitter drink known as coffee, loaded with milk and cream. He too was neatly dressed, in a dark red waistcoat and brown breeches. However, the dark circles under his eyes showed that regardless of Mistress Scott's fresh-faced appearance, the two of them had likely stayed up for the rest of the night.

Mistress Scott put her tea cup down with a clink. Kanen'to:kon stopped running his bit of scone around the plate in aimless circles. Aveline swallowed.

"I and Saint-Prix," she said, briefly gesturing to the man at the other end of the table, "have taken what you said last night into consideration. While what you overheard was disturbing, the revelation that they have infiltrated the Sons of Liberty is even more so. Because of that, I have another assignment for you two."

Aveline delicately dabbed at her lips.

"The Brotherhood needs you to continue with your relationship with the friend that invited you two in the first place. The events from last night prove that Saint-Prix's relationship with Adams is not enough. Try to get closer with those in charge, and help them keep a grip on events in this city. We cannot allow the Templars to subvert the population for their own ends."

Kanen'to:kon sighed.

Those last words. They kept echoing in his head as he and Aveline, again dressed to better fit in to colonial society, stood in front of Stephane's doorway, waiting for him to answer.

Shortly after Mistress Scott had given their orders, a message had arrived at the house from Stephane. The Frenchman had been requesting another meeting with the two of them, saying that he wanted to apologize for making them uncomfortable enough to leave that night. With Mistress Scott's eyes boring into their backs, they had agreed to meet him again, this time at his home.

What were they going to do? Stephane seemed to know Adams, that was true, but they had no real clue how close the Frenchman was to the ringleader of the Sons of Liberty. Even if he was working with the man to fight against the Regulars, even if Stephane called the man friend, that was no guarantee -

The door swung open, and Kanen'to:kon abruptly found himself with an armful of happy Frenchman.
"Ah, Aveline! Ganen! How good to see you! Come in, come in!" he said, giving each of them a squeeze before gesturing for them to come in. "I am so 'appy that you managed to make it!"

Stepping into the dimly lit hallway, Kanen'to:kon turned to his side and shuffled, trying not to bump into anything. Being as big a man as he was, that was a difficult proposition. The narrow doorways and halls of the lower class colonists were designed to minimize the amount of space that they buildings took up so that more people could be packed into the same space. Kanen'to:kon didn't understand why this was seen as a good thing. He and his people may live in longhouses, but they always had enough room to sleep in their own family bunks. Some of the homes that he had seen had had four or more families forced into the same amount of space that one family took up in his village.

This particular house seemed especially run down to Kanen'to:kon's eye. Dust lay everywhere, coating any surface that wasn't covered with cloths already. The floor was filthy with dirt and mud that had been trooped in with the other tenements of the building. Even the windows were grubby with handprints.

The door closed with the click of the lock. Turning back around, Stephane rubbed his hands together, still smiling.

"I was worried that you would not wish to talk to me after the other night," he said, walking over to the staircase. "What, with breaking my oath to give you a good dinner. I am sorry about that, by the way. I forgot how it gets during meetings."

"It's quite alright Stephane," Aveline said, following him confidently. Kanen'to:kon in turn followed her, feeling much less comfortable than she seemed to be. He wasn't sure why, but his gut was churning, and not in its usual nervousness around people.

When Stephane opened the door to his particular apartment, Kanen'to:kon found out what the churning was. There, sitting in the corner of the room on a chair by a small table, was a familiar figure.

Sam Adams, leader of the Sons of Liberty. Who noticeably looked unsurprised to see them.

"Good afternoon to the both of you," the dark-haired man said, standing up. He held out a hand to shake. "I was worried that you wouldn't make it."

Both he and Aveline froze, their minds sending up fireworks of alarms. Had Saint-Prix been wrong? Adams' gaze was not flicking over their outfits like most colonists' eyes did. Could the man be a Templar?

The silence between them stretched out uncomfortably. Despite his seeming confidence, Adams wilted surprisingly quickly when neither of them made a move to take his hand in the colonial style. Clearing his throat, he let his hand drop back to his side, wiping it against his dark blue coat in an oddly nervous gesture for the spokesman of a secret society.

"My apologies," he said, almost sounding meek. "I did not mean to alarm you."

Kanen'to:kon pressed his lips together. If that was what Adams had wanted, then he had failed. During their training as Assassins, their nerves had been forged and hammered into steel wires; tough, but prone to vibrating at a touch. Surprising an Assassin in a way such as this was one of the worst ways to introduce oneself, and from Heiman's stories, also one of the fastest ways to get a knife in the neck. The man was lucky that neither he nor Aveline had a more violent reaction than stiffening.
"I don't suppose we can sit down then, Mister Chapheau?" asked Adams, turning to the Frenchman.

Stephane puffed out his chest slightly. "Of course," he said, gesturing broadly at the room. "Wherever you can find a seat."

Wherever indeed, Kanen'to:kon thought, tearing his eyes away from Adams. The room was tiny, with barely enough space for a bed, the table and the chair. A chest holding what Kanen'to:kon assumed was clothing and other belongings was half-shoved underneath the unmade bed, a rusted lock on its front.

Tentatively sitting on the bed, very aware now of the odd scent of a confirmed bachelor that permeated the small space, Kanen'to:kon interlaced his fingers in his lap to keep from tugging at his braids. Aveline sat down beside him, her back straight and eyes narrow.

Covering his mouth, Adams cleared his throat and let it fall back down to his lap. "If I may," he said, "please allow me to introduce myself properly. My name is Samuel Adams, and I -"

"Am one of the ringleaders of the Sons of Liberty," Aveline said coolly. "We are well aware of you, Mister Adams."

Kanen'to:kon expected the man to look surprised, or at least a little nervous. Instead, though, he just grinned and looked relieved.

"Good," he said jovially, "so you two are connected to them!"

Kanen'to:kon, doing his best impression of the colonist idea of a stoic Indian warrior, glanced over to Aveline. She carefully placed a hand on each knee and leaned forward slightly, lifting an eyebrow.

"Them?" she asked, keeping her voice neutral.

"Those hooded people!"

Kanen'to:kon stamped down on his panic and kept still.

"The ones I've seen on the roofs, watching us. Watching our fight against the motherland."

Mistress Scott was not going to like this.

Beside him, Aveline clenched her jaw. "I know of no such connection," she said slowly, "but if, in theory, we were connected to 'the hooded people', might I ask what you wanted with them?"

"Help." Adams leaned forward in his seat, clasping his hands together until his knuckles were white.

Aveline and Kanen'to:kon traded a look.

"I'm sure that you're aware of the violence plaguing our fair city -"

"Violence that you certainly are not discouraging," Aveline murmured.

Adams reluctantly nodded at her point and continued on. "Yes," he said, "perhaps I have encouraged people to physically defend their rights. But not to the extent that I've seen in the past few weeks." He looked up at them, his face shining with conviction. "We cannot make a case for self-government when we attack with such violence. It only proves the authorities right, that we are
not ready to govern ourselves in any meaningful manner. Slaughtering our fellow men and stringing them up -"

"As opposed to tarring and feathering them?" Aveline said, innocently cocking her head to the side as if she was truly confused. She held the position for a moment as Adams worked his mouth before narrowing her eyes again. "Do not waste our time, Mister Adams. What do you want from our organization?"

Adams pressed his lips together until they were bloodless. Then he leaned back and let out a long, low sigh. "That's the way it's going to be, then," he said softly, almost as if he was talking to himself. "So be it."

Looking back at them, he laced his fingers over his stomach. "Things are bad again. Almost as bad as before the riots. I don't know why, and quite frankly, at this point, I don't have the time to care why. There's going to be another dust-up, and soon. And if I hope to keep things from getting as bad as they were, then I need to point everyone towards one target and one target alone. And frankly, we Sons of Liberty are at a bit of a loss as to how to do that." He spread his hands out helplessly. "But you hooded fellows. I've seen your sort in this city since I was a child. You are organized. To a far greater extent than us. And I believe that if we have any hope of defusing the situation before it explodes, we need the help of a more far-reaching organization."

Kanen'to:kon bit the inside of his cheek. "If we did," he said, slowly, carefully pronouncing every word, "perhaps, belong to an organization like that, I can not help but wonder what, precisely, the organization would be getting in return."

Adams looked at him as if he was a madman.

"Why, you would be preventing yet another massacre!" he said.

"But such things take a great deal of planning and preparation," Aveline interjected smoothly. "And what if this hypothetical organization is already stretched thin? What if they can't spare as many people as needed?"

"We would not be making your organization do all the work!" Adams said, looking stung. "We would pull our own weight! No, all we need is for you fellows to do is reach those places that we cannot!"

"And what are those places? Where would we even be attacking? And you still have not answered what our hypothetical organization would get from this aside from a great deal of danger!"

For a moment, Adams looked as if he would jump to his feet and throttle Aveline. He was stopped from doing so by the sound of a fist hammering on a door.

"Come out, citizens! In the name of the king, we are authorized to search this residence!"

The four of them looked at each other in alarm, their argument forgotten. A search, here and now? Getting up from where he was leaning against the wall, Stephane peeked out of the room's window.

"Merde," he hissed, "There is five of them. All armed." He turned towards the Kanen'to:kon and Aveline, still sitting on the bed. "Can you take them out?" he asked.

Aveline pressed her lips together and looked at Kanen'to:kon, alarm written large across her face. "Yes," she said, "but in this case, that might not be the best way to go about things."
Kanen'to:kon returned her worried look with one of his own. "That is true," he said, "this is not an empty street like last time."

"Pardon me, like last time?" Adams interjected, looking both puzzled and alarmed. "What precisely do you mean by that?"

Several more bangs echoed through the tenement. Aveline sucked on her lower lip and stood up.

"We will play nice for now," she said firmly. "Is there anything contraband in here, Stephane?"

But Stephane didn't answer. He was looking out the window again, and now shaking his head furiously.

"Non, non," he muttered, his voice a growl. "Non. Not again." His eyes narrowed, flaming with rage. "Never again."

Kanen'to:kon glanced at Adams, who had also stood up. Taking a step towards Stephane, he placed a careful hand on the Frenchman's shoulder. "Mister Chapheau," he said carefully. "Stephen. Don't lose your head. We don't need close scrutiny right now -"

"So I am to just let them tear my home apart? Let them rob me?" Stephane snapped, wheeling on his heel to prod Adams sharply in the chest. "Let them do whatever they want while I cower in front of them? Non!" Reaching under the pillow on the bed, he pulled out a cleaver that gleamed in the sunlight.

"I will not cower!" he spat. Shouldering Adams aside, he flung the door open and charged down the stairs. Kanen'to:kon and Aveline didn't even have to look at each other; they followed the Frenchman outside, already pulling out their weapons.

A loud howl of pain and screams met them at the door. Out on the street, Stephane snarled and wrenched his cleaver out of the shoulder of what looked to be the leader. The man's fellow soldiers stood around them, frozen in shock. But already, Kanen'to:kon could see them stirring, their minds dragging themselves out of the sticky morass of shock and horror only to dive into anger.

Kneeling on the ground, blood pouring from where his shoulder and neck had been separated, the leader trembled, looking at Stephane with a mixture of fear and rage. Blood bubbling at his lips, Kanen'to:kon somehow could still hear the words he said.

"K-kill him."

That was the final jolt that the soldiers needed. Snarling, they surged forwards, bringing their muskets around to bear. Unfortunately for the soldiers, their leader's words were also the final jolt that Kanen'to:kon and Aveline needed as well.

Unsheathing their hidden blades, they surged forwards. Aveline, as talented as always, kicked the nearest man's musket, knocking it into the path of the second soldier and tripping him so that he lay sprawling in the dirt. She followed up by then cutting the first soldier's throat. Kanen'to:kon was not so fancy. He simply bodyslammed the third soldier to the ground and stabbed him up under the ribcage and into the man's heart. The other two soldiers went down similarly easily.

The road had emptied as they fought. Putting his weapons away, Kanen'to:kon noted with a dark bit of humour how quickly all of the people that had been just walking around had run away. Looking over at Stephane, he saw that the man did not look satisfied, alternately squeezing and relaxing his hands by his sides.
Reaching over, Kanen'to:kon tried to put a hand on the man's shoulder. Colonists found that comforting, didn't they? But Stephane shook it off with a snarl.

"Damned lobsters!" he snarled, his eyes alight with fury. "This is the last time I will let this happen!"

Kanen'to:kon blinked and looked to Aveline for help. She looked back at him and shrugged, a worried look on her face.

Then, distantly, at the end of the street, there was drumming. Their heads jerked up. Down at the end of the street, another small squad of Regulars had appeared; a soldier, an officer and a drummer. Stephane launched himself at them before Kanen'to:kon or Aveline could stop him.

"Oi, you lobsters!" he screamed, holding his cleaver aloft. The officer tensed and drew his pistol, drawing aim at the screaming Frenchman.

But Aveline was faster. Her gun went off, hideously loud in the quiet street, and the officer crumpled. The soldier and drummer looked confused, staring at the body of their leader, then back at Aveline. Then after Stephane reached them, they couldn't stare anymore. The cook cut them down with a furious yell and then darted away again, ranting furiously in French.

They followed him of course. For all of his apparent fury, Stephane had been a good friend to them for the short while they had known each other for. He went around, attacking every soldier he could find and ranting when he could not find any, until finally they reached the docks, where a large ship was being unloaded.

Several workers were milling around, carrying stamped boxes and looking bored as a foreman shouted at them uselessly. Stephane had fallen silent as he entered the area, but from what Kanen'to:kon could see of his face, he was no less furious.

"You!" he roared as he headed towards the foreman. The man stuttered to a stop mid-shout and turned to look down his nose at Stephane. "I know you, you bastard! You're the one that keeps sending those thugs to search my home!"

The foreman sneered. "Do I know you?" he asked.

He stopped sneering when Stephane slammed his cleaver into his shoulder.

Screams and shouts rippled through the dock like a stone dropped into a pond. The dockworkers, all rough, burly men dropped the crates they were carrying and fled, putting a lie to their tough appearances. Gasping, the foreman dropped to his knees, the cleaver still stuck in his shoulder.

His face pale, he looked up at Stephane as Kanen'to:kon approached.

"How?" he whispered, a shaking hand reaching up to touch the blood covering his chest. "How?"

Stephane sneered. "I always knew it was you," he growled menacingly. "Who else insulted my cooking that much?"

With a wet squelch that made Kanen'to:kon wince, he ripped the cleaver from the man. The foreman's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed.

Turning, the Frenchman wiped at his face, muttering. Kanen'to:kon grimaced. Blood was streaked across his cheeks and forehead. Behind him, he could feel Aveline come up.
"Well," asked Aveline, "do you feel any better?"

Stephane growled. "I will feel better," he said defiantly, "when these damned Englishmen are gone from my city!"

"Maybe we can help you with that then," she said. Slipping out in front of Kanen'to:kon, she held something out. Kanen'to:kon cocked his head curiously. It was a little bag with a stamp on its side.

"This is tea from the East India Company," she said. "A company that our enemies have a large stake in. I think, Stephane, that you can tell Mister Adams that we might have a way to work together after all."
"What."

Kanen'ito:kon winced.

"He seems to be aware of the Assassins, Mistress Scott," he repeated, silently proud of the steadiness of his voice. "He doesn't know the name, but he definitely knew of our organization."

Groaning, the older woman dropped her head into her hands. Kanen'ito:kon and Aveline traded sympathetic looks. This was hardly an easy thing to come to grips with. Years and years of thinking that the Brotherhood had been kept a secret, only for it to be revealed that someone had known of them, violating one of their main tenets? Even the fact that he did not know the name of their organization did would do nothing to soothe the sting.

"Damn," Mistress Scott muttered, rubbing her temples. "Did he seem to be using it to blackmail you two? Anything like that?"

Kanen'ito:kon shook his head. "No," he said, "he just wanted to get us to work with him, and had to reveal what he knew. He did not seem to be trying to threaten us."

The irritated look on her face did not fade. Following her gaze, Kanen'ito:kon saw that her eyes slid over to look at Saint-Prix.

Saint-Prix scowled back at her. "Do not blame me for this," he said. "I have only been in this city for the past year."

"And in the past year, Adams somehow found out about us."

"Er, actually," Kanen'ito:kon interjected, quailing slightly as both turned and shot burning gazes at him, "Adams mentioned that he had seen us around the city since he was a child."

"There, see?" snapped Saint-Prix, turning back to the older woman, "Adams was only using his god-given ability to pay attention to the world around him." He leaned over he desk and placed his hands on it. "We should take advantage of this," he pleaded. "The Sons of Liberty have a massive following amongst the people and we don't have anyone reporting back what they're up to. This is a great chance for us to get a better grip on the city!"

"And also to become beholden to another group of people. What are we to say if it turns out they have Templars amongst their ranks, Templars that need to die? Oh, sorry, we have to go and murder half of your little club?"

"But Mistress Scott," Aveline interjected, stepping closer to Mistress Scott's desk, "remember what we overheard when we followed that Templar agent? The Templars do not have anyone in there either." Her face softened as she looked down on the white-haired woman. "There will be violence no matter what happens. Let us take a hand in guiding that violence so that it harms the Templars, not the Assassins."

For several heartbeats, Mistress Scott was still. Then she closed her eyes and sighed, reaching up to rub her forehead.

"I'm going to regret this, but - what's your plan?"
Reaching into one of her pouches, Aveline pulled out a pouch of tea and tossed it onto Jenny's desk.

"This."

Picking it up, Mistress Scott turned it over in her hands as Aveline continued.

"There was another attempt to search Stephane's home while we were there and he went on a rampage that just so happened to lead to the docks, where a ship from the East India Company had docked. One of the taxes that people are so angry about is the tea tax that forces them to buy from the British. And if I remember correctly, I believe that the Templars are known for having a rather large stock in such things, are they not?"

Kanen'to:kon could see the corners of Mistress Scott's lips twitch as she examined the red-stamped bag closely. "That is true," she said, not looking at Aveline.

"Tell me, Saint-Prix," she asked suddenly, "since you are so very eager to attack the Templars, do you recall if any of them have a particularly high stock in the East India Company?"

Kanen'to:kon could feel the tension in Saint-Prix's frame behind him, but the man's voice was admirably calm.

"I believe, actually, that it is a certain Master Johnson of the Templar's Inner Circle that has a ship in the harbour right now. Filled to the bursting with that tea, in fact."

The twitching of the older woman's lips became a full-blown smirk at Saint-Prix's words. "Well then," she said, depositing the bag on her desk carelessly. "I suppose that we have our answer now, don't we."

"Aveline," she said, nodding to her, "I am putting you and Kanen'to:kon in charge of guiding the Sons of Liberty towards attacking Master Johnson's ship. Say whatever you have to, but do not promise anything concrete. Play the demanding mistress if you have to; they came to us, they have to prove that it's worth our while to work with them. Saint-Prix will be working with you when it comes to support and logistics. I am giving you carte-blanche here, so don't abuse it."

"And above all," she said, catching them in an eagle's stern gaze, "remember the third tenet of our creed. Do not compromise the Brotherhood."

And that was that. The Brotherhood had chosen sides.

Aveline lay a warm hand over Kanen'to:kon's to stop his drumming. His outlet for stress gone, Kanen'to:kon instead took a sip of the cold and over-steeped tea that they had ordered when they sat down.

Where was Adams?

The tavern was empty at this time of day. The lunch rush, when all of the day workers came in to have a drink and something to eat, had ended nearly an hour ago, allowing all of the dawdlers to straggle out so that there would be privacy. Up at the bar, Stephane was wiping down the counter, boredly whistling a colonist tune.

Kanen'to:kon supposed that Adams' lateness could be blamed on the many guards that were patrolling the streets again. A new shipload of Regulars had arrived just the other day from up north. They were easy to pick out in the streets. Unlike the soldiers that had been in the city for the riots, they swaggered and strutted around in their patrols, their guns and buttons gleaming in the
weak winter sun. The soldiers that had been in the city were not so bold. They slunk from post to post, their eyes darting everywhere, suspicion evident in the quivering lines of their bodies.

But the new soldiers did not just swagger. They were also proactive. According to Saint-Prix, they were rather conspicuously parading past the houses of known troublemakers and rabble-rousers, and Adams was included in that list of people. But surely the man was able to simply leave while there were no soldiers by his house! There were not that many still in the city!

Finally, just as Aveline was pouring the last dregs of the tea into her own cup, Adams slipped into the dim tavern. Pausing at the door, his eyes skittered around the room before landing on them and lighting up in relief. Practically running over, he pulled the chair out from opposite of them and plopped down in it.

"So," he said jovially, "would I be correct in assuming that you carry good news with you?"

Aveline shifted beside Kanen'to:kon, leaning forward and resting her chin in her hand. "That," she drawled in her soft, French-accented voice, "would depend entirely on your definition of good news, Mister Adams."

Adams raised an eyebrow at that and leaned forward as well, looking interested. "Definitions can be tricky," he said smoothly. "How about you let me know what your superiors thought of my proposal and I'll let you know if I think that it's good news."

Kanen'to:kon's lips twitched. The man was good with his words, he had to admit. He was also good at not being caught off-guard. It would be interesting to see his reaction to the Assassins' terms.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kanen'to:kon saw that Aveline was smiling slightly too. She obviously found Adams' little bit of wordplay amusing as well. Kanen'to:kon had no doubt, though, that she was going to enjoy setting out the terms more.

"Your words, as I repeated them, were found to be touching," she began, still drawling. Her eyes were hooded but glittering, paying close attention to Adams. "We found the riots and the undirected violence that has been gripping the city disturbing as well. So in the interests of preventing another set of riots such as this from breaking out, we've come up with a plan. However," she said, tapping a finger against the wooden tabletop, "there will be some rules in return for help this one time."

Adams rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "And what, precisely, will those rules be?" he asked.

"For starters, during the main operation, you will obey our advice when it comes to, ah, martial matters."

"Martial matters?" he quoted, "We are trying to stop another riot, not start one!"

"And this will do just that, if all goes well," Aveline said, raising a hand to ward off his alarm. "No one with half a brain would be unable to notice that people will not be content with just petitions. People need a symbol to rally around, something to cheer for, and I believe we have just that."

The older man didn't look completely mollified, but he did pull back slightly, his eyes darting between the two of them. Kanen'to:kon couldn't help but feel a little bit of disappointment at that. Was the man so weak-hearted that he would not stand with them if he was not in complete control? He had thought that he was more reasonable than that, but if he was like all of the other colonists outside the Brotherhood that Kanen'to:kon had met...
"Kanen'to:kon," Aveline said, turning towards him, "show him the parcel."

Reluctantly, Kanen'to:kon turned away. Reaching into one of the many pouches that hung off of his belt, he pulled out the little cotton sack that held the dark, dried leaves that the English loved so much and tossed it onto the table. Immediately, Adams' eyes locked onto it.

Reaching out, he delicately picked it up and began to look it over, lingering on the red stamp that dominated the white cloth.

"This is tea," he said mildly. Glancing up at them, he raised an eyebrow. "English tea."

"Precisely," Aveline said, leanign back in her chair. "One of the things that you have been protesting is being forced to buy only English tea, no?"

Kanen'to:kon had to give it to the man, he caught on fast. "You want to attack one of the tea ships in the harbour," he said slowly. "They are not precisely left to their own devices, though."

Aveline nodded, looking satisfied. "There are many guards, that is true," she said, "but that is something that we can handle. What we need you to do is to get as many people to come and watch as possible."

Adams hesitated. "Watch," he said hesitantly, "but not fight."

"No. Hopefully, seeing us beat up any Regular that dares try to stop us will be cathartic enough."

Aveline shifted, crossing her slim legs. "Watching you and your fellow Sons of Liberty dump all of that tea into the Boston harbour should help as well."

Adams frowned. "If me and my fellow patriots are the ones dumping the tea, that means that we will also be the ones to become wanted if things go wrong."

Aveline shrugged. "Then disguise yourselves," she said. "Something that won't immediately point to the Sons of Liberty."

The dark-haired man shook his head. "I'm afraid that we're too well known to the authorities," he said. "A disguise might not work."

"It is not as if we will just allow the guards to stand around," Aveline said. "Most of them will be dead by the time you actually get around to dumping the tea." She mock-frowned, furrowing her brow exaggeratedly and cocking her head to the side. "You know, I thought that you wanted our help. But you have done nothing but shoot down everything that I have suggested."

But Adams was shaking his head before she had even finished talking. "It's not that I don't appreciate your help," he said. "I'm just cautious about starting something that could easily end up causing more riots, or exposing us to the authorities. They want someone they can make an example of, and I will not risk my fellow member's families either. I want to make sure that this is not needlessly risky."

Kanen'to:kon thought that that was understandable, if irritating. Why had the man started into such risky work, though, if he was not willing to see it through to the end? Shifting in his seat, he was about to say something to that effect when Aveline beat him to the punch.

"Nothing in life is risk-free," she said, leaning forward and laying a hand on top of Adams'. "No matter what, there will always be a chance of being spotted. But let me assure you, our organization is very efficient when it comes to keeping identities secret. Even if someone acquires proof of your involvement, we will protect you and your family. Think of the operation as us
joining you in your fight."

Adams hummed to himself. "So your organization is not the type to leave someone behind, eh?" he said, looking them over. His lips quirked slightly into a small smile. "I have to say, that does seem consistent with the sorts of things I've seen you hooded fellows do."

Kanen'to:kon tensed at the reminder of their discovery, Mistress Scott's admonishments ringing in his ears. Judging from the sudden tension around Aveline's eyes, she was hearing the echoes as well.

"Oh?" she asked, picking her hand off of Adams'. "What have you seen of us, anyways?"

Adams' eyes darted between the two of them, but his smile didn't falter. "Oh, a few things. Nothing to important, I wager, otherwise I doubt I would still be among the living."

"And those unimportant things?"

"You lads and ladies running along the rooftops," he said, turning to Stephane to gesture for a new pot of tea. "Crouching on balconies or sitting on benches and staring at buildings intently. And I'm quite certain that at one point I saw someone being dragged away by two of you for some reason."

Turning back to them, he raised an eyebrow again. "A reason that I think I know, but would probably be rude to bring up when things have been going so well."

Aveline graciously inclined her head. "Much appreciated."

"In any case, for all my protests I hardly have any plan to offer instead of yours. I suppose I must accede to your demands," he said, flashing his teeth at them in a grin, showing that for all of his complaints that there were no hard feelings. "Any plans for how quickly this needs to be done?"

"That depends entirely on how quickly you can get your friends organized enough to gather a crowd," said Aveline, grinning back at him.

"Ah, well then," he said heartily, "how about the day after tomorrow then?"

"So soon?"

"My friends have been just as anxious to prevent more undirected violence as I. It won't take more than a few words to have everything ready, if you're preparing the scene for us."

"The day after tomorrow it is, then." Aveline rose from the table, with Kanen'to:kon following her belatedly. "We will let the others know. The docks surrounding the ship will be empty by sundown the day of the operation. Just bring your friends," she said, her eyes sparkling.

"Oh, please," protested Adams, half-rising from his chair, "won't you stay for tea now that the business is out of the way? I had planned to meet some of my friends here in a little while anyways; it would do both of our groups good if they met you."

"Regrettably," she said, a false note of gaiety in her voice, "for our part, it is not so simple as just calling on our friends. We have to report back."

"Then at least come and meet us before things start." Fully rising from his seat, he began to pat himself down, looking for something. "Now where did I put it - blast!" Pulling out a piece of dirty paper and a nub of charcoal, he quickly scrawled something on it and held it out. "Our main meeting house," he said in explanation. "Come there before sundown and I will properly introduce you to everyone. It's only proper, with everything that you're doing for us."
Reaching out, Kanen'to:kon took it before Aveline could and looked it over before tucking it away in a pouch. The location was in a fairly nice part of the city; one that hadn't been destroyed quite as thoroughly as some others had during the riots. He gave a brief nod to Adams and turned to leave with his partner.

"Oh," said Adams, straightening his coat, "and if I could just ask one more thing before you two leave - why this ship, then?"

Kanen'to:kon glanced over at Aveline quickly. They had not discussed this with Mistress Scott, so -

"Because we have certain connections, Mister Adams. Connections that are just as angry about the tea as you and your fellow citizens are."

Kanen'to:kon's lips twitched up into a smile. So quick, Aveline was!
Kanen'to:kon rapped at the plain wooden door and stepped back. Inside, he could hear several people moving around and whispering to each other without straining his ears. Glancing back at Aveline, he rose his eyebrows at her and jerked his head at the building. How had these people managed to keep a secret anti-British society going?

Aveline smirked back, her tricorn tilted at a cocky angle over her forehead. Shrugging, her eyes slid back to the door just as the sound of several locks being opened reached them. Straightening, Kanen'to:kon put on his best 'intimidating Indian' face. His hood helped, he knew. Wearing a dark tan deer-hide jacket with the hood buckled on, he was an unusual sight. The purple and green beadwork along the hems and his sash did nothing to discourage this, nor did the odd mishmash of colonial and native clothing. Saint-Prix and Mistress Scott had not liked it. They had wanted him to wear a more purely colonist outfit. But Kanen'to:kon had put his foot down on that. He was of the Kanien'ke:ha, and he was not going to let that be erased.

At the very least, such an outfit certainly had people giving him funny looks. The round-eyed look that he was getting from the man that had answered the door certainly had his lips twitching, at least.

"Errrr," the man said, his eyes locked on Kanen'to:kon's chest, "Sam?"

"Yes?" came the voice of Adams from deeper into the house.

"There's a rather big fellow here -"

Adams' head popped around the corner of the small hallway that the door lead into and broke into a large smile. "Ah, so you did have the time to come!" he said, laughing and walking towards them with his hand outstretched. After grabbing them and pumping them up and down a few times, he turned back to his friend.

"Paul," he said, gesturing to them, "these are the people I was telling you about - they'll be working with us tonight to send a message to the authorities."

The newly-named Paul laughed nervously and flashed a smile at them. "I see," he said. "I'll admit, I'm not sure what I expected when Sam was talking about you two. Please," he said, standing to one side, "come in."

The hallways was, if anything, even more narrow inside than it had looked outside. Ducking his head to keep from striking it against the ceiling, he squished himself to one side so that Aveline could slip by.

"Mister Adams," she said, stepping into the house and smiling with glittering eyes, "it is good to see you. Would I be correct in assuming that you are just finishing up preparations for tonight?"

"Yes, yes," he said, turning to go further down the hallway, gesturing for them to follow. "Quite a few people were interested in our protest tonight - it really is the perfect sort of one, too, I have to say, very focused - and they have been helping me organize things to make sure that we have a proper audience."

"That is good to hear," Aveline said, following him. Kanen'to:kon fell into line with her, just a pace behind. It really was a cozy home. Kanen'to:kon could hear people moving around up above, lightfooted; undoubtedly Paul's wife and children, judging from the small touches around the
It still put his back up, though, and he could feel his face sliding into a forbidding expression.

Perhaps that was why everyone in the room Adams guided them to backed up slightly as he entered. Kanen'to:kon very nearly apologized. Adams, however, completely ignored his friends' intimidation and simply began to introduce them to the group.

"Gentlemen," he said, gesturing, "these are the people that I was telling you about. They will be the ones making this demonstration possible."

Dead silence met Adams' pronouncement. Stretching out until it was almost painfully insulting, the men studied them with a skeptical air that had Kanen'to:kon's hackles rising in reply until he was tempted to break his usual stoicism to say something sarcastic. He was saved from doing so, though, when one of the men finally fake-coughed to break the uncomfortable air.

"Pardon me, Sam," he said, "and not that I'm doubting you, but how precisely are two people supposed to help us pull off one of the largest protests we've ever attempted? And out of the goodness of their hearts?"

Before Adams could reply, Aveline stepped forward from the doorway, slipping around Kanen'to:kon.

"The two of us might not be able to do much," she said, her voice silky smooth, "but then again, it is not just the two of us that Mister Adams has helping your group. We are mere representatives of a larger group that finds its interests aligned with yours, Mister-?"

"Hancock," the man said, studying the two of them closely. "John Hancock."

"A pleasure," Aveline said, studying him right back. The man seemed unsettled by her frank regard, shifting his weight slightly from one foot to the other. It was uncharitable, Kanen'to:kon knew, but he couldn't help but wonder if it was because the man was far more used to submission from those with Aveline's skin tone.

Aveline ignored the man's discomfort, however, and turned back to Adams.

"Would I be correct in assuming that you have everything prepared for tonight already?"

Adams, to his credit, made no sign of noticing the tensions between his friends and them. He nodded briskly and crossed his arms.

"It's all done," he said, "everyone's ready to march. Is the ship still guarded or no?"

"It is still guarded, but only because we are waiting for the change in shifts. It would do no good to take out the afternoon shift and then have to deal with the evening shift being on high alert."


Kanen'to:kon was so glad that they approved.

"We've already mapped out the patrol routes, though, so taking them out before you arrive will be child's play," Aveline continued, placing a hand on her hip near her sword. "You were worried about being recognized, I know - did you find appropriate disguises?"

At that, all of the men grinned and nodded. "Oh yes. Yes we did."
The air crackled with tension, as if it was just a few seconds from a lightning strike. Walking down the street with the cold winter air stinging his nostrils, Kanen'to:kon could feel the eyes of dozens of people on him, peeking out from their windows and doors and watching as he cleaned off his blade and sheathed it. It had been easy, getting rid of all of the guards that had been posted around the ship, but Kanen'to:kon knew that the men's disappearance would not gone unnoticed. They needed to start the assault on the ship now, before any patrols passed by.

A thump beside him on the cobbled street announced Aveline's arrival from taking care of her half of the guards.

"Where are they?" she asked, echoing Kanen'to:kon's thoughts.

Kanen'to:kon shrugged helplessly. He just hoped that they hadn't gotten cold feet after everything. Technically, he and Aveline would be able to do all of the tea dumping by themselves, but without an audience, the entire thing would just be a waste of time. "Perhaps they are just delayed?" he suggested. "It is rather cold out."

Aveline tightened her lips and looked away, down the main street that the Sons of Liberty would come down. It was depressingly empty.

"Even if they don't arrive," she said, "we should still toss the tea overboard. Hurt Johnson and the rest of the Templars in their purses."

Kanen'to:kon nodded and rubbed his hands together for warmth. "I agree," he said, blowing on his fingers, "but we shouldn't give up just yet, I think. Adams did seem to want to make this work."

"Adams, yes," she said, shivering as a cold breeze whipped by, "it's the rest of the Sons of Liberty that I'm worried about."

Kanen'to:kon bit the inside of his cheek. He couldn't help but agree silently with her assessment of the others. They had seemed worried when they had arrived, which did not bode well. But in this case, he would have to be the encouraging one. It would do no good if both of them began to act as if their mission was going to fail.

He had just opened up his mouth to say something encouraging when Aveline struck him in the chest and hissed. "What was that?" she asked.

Immediately shutting his mouth with a clack, Kanen'to:kon strained his ears to hear what she had. At first, all he could hear was the wind whistling through the streets, eager to nip at any exposed flesh. But slowly, as he blocked out any distractions, he heard it.

People.

Lots of people. All talking, heading right towards them.

His lips quirked up into a smirk. Glancing at his partner out of the corner of his eye, he saw her intense look softened slightly be wonder.

"Looks like we should not have been worried, eh?" he said. She hit his arm, but he saw that she was smiling as well.

The sounds of the crowd got louder and louder as they got closer, until they turned the final corner and the two of them saw just how big a crowd the Sons of Liberty had gathered. Marching at the head of the mob, their backs straight and pride in the lines of their bodies, they grinned and waved
at Kanen'to:kon and Aveline as they came closer. The mob behind them, holding lanterns and torches, chanting and singing songs, roared with approval as they saw the empty, guard-less docks, raising their voices even louder until Kanen'to:kon was sure that no one living in the buildings nearby would have been able to sleep through it.

And it was at this point that Kanen'to:kon realized just what the Sons of Liberty were wearing.

Indian clothes. Or at least, the fantasy of Indian clothes. Patterns from undoubtedly several different tribes, haphazardly layered, feathers sticking out all over the place - if Kanen'to:kon wasn't so offended, he would have laughed at how stupid the men looked. As it was though, he clenched his fists tight enough that if he wasn't wearing gloves, he would have pierced his palms with his fingernails.

Aveline seemed to feel him tense beside him and glanced over, worry clear on her face beneath her excitement. But Kanen'to:kon simply bit the inside of his cheek and shook his head. Now was not the time to complain; it was too late to change anything and they were in the middle of the operation. So turning back, he stilled his face into a more welcoming look and resigned himself to stabbing a dummy a few times back at Mistress Scott's manor.

Finally, the Sons of Liberty came to a stop in front of them. The mob behind them began to spread out, surrounding the area while still singing songs. Sticking out his hand, Adams grinned.

"Better than you expected, eh?" he said quietly, leaning close. "Hope we didn't worry you."

"Just a little," Aveline said, arching a brow elegantly as he took his hand and pumped. "You were late."

Adams shrugged, still smiling. "Took a little while to get people out of their houses. It's cold tonight, after all. Most people want to stay close to the hearth these times. But not true patriots, eh?!" He turned and yelled the last sentence to the crowd surrounding them, who roared their approval. Kanen'to:kon rubbed his ears.

His coat swirling around him in winter wind, snow peppering his hair, Adams turned and clambered on top of a pile of crates with surprising nimbleness for a middle-aged colonist. Once he was standing on top of them, he stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. It's piercing shriek cut through the chatter of the crowd around Kanen'to:kon and every head turned to look at the source of the sound.

"Friends! Fellow patriots! I welcome you to our protest!" Adams shouted, raising his arms. "And I mean, protest! We stand here tonight in protest of our overlords back in England and their tyrannical taxes! We stand here tonight in protest of their monopolies, and how they force their products on us so that they can wring us for every hard-earned penny we have! We stand in protest, so that they can no longer ignore our voices!"

The crowd roared. There was definitely no way that this gathering would not be noticed. Tilting his head to one side, Kanen'to:kon murmured out of the side of his mouth to Aveline, "We should head for higher ground." She looked back at him, her brown eyes glittering in the lamplight, and nodded.

His fingertips so cold that he could barely feel the rough wood beneath them, Kanen'to:kon was quick to haul himself up the side of the nearest house. Aveline was already up there, her eyes the dark gold that they always were when she was using her special vision. Below, Adams continued to whip the crowd up, his face a red so bright that Kanen'to:kon could see it even from where he was standing.
He hoped that that was not prescient of blood being spilled tonight.

Of course, as soon as he thought that, Aveline's eyes narrowed. Lifting her hand, she pointed down one of the streets. "There," she said. "Down that street. Regulars."

"Of course," Kanen'to:kon muttered, pulling his bow off of his shoulder and notching an arrow. "Should we bother with hand to hand or just pick them off from here?"

"There's more than in the usual patrol," Aveline said, cracking her knuckles. "Most likely we'll have to do a bit of both."

Kanen'to:kon grimaced. "Alright then," he said, "how about I start picking them off when they get closer while you loop around and start taking them out from the back?"

"Hem them in, then?" Aveline said, still staring in the direction of the Regulars. They were getting closer by the second, and a few members of the crowd were starting to look behind them. "A good idea, that. But first -"

Gracefully, she dropped down from the roof. Clinging to the side of the house by a shutter, she quickly waved her hand. Kanen'to:kon saw Adams' head turn slightly, his smooth patter continuing. Aveline pointed at the ships, and Adams nodded.

"And now," he roared, "we strike back! And we make our voice heard!"

The crowd screamed in rapturous joy. The voices of a hundred people echoed in Kanen'to:kon's ears as began to make his way across the roofs. The Regulars had paused now, and were staring at the crowd. They seemed to be frightened and confused; while their duty was to keep the peace in the city (and a mob was certainly not peaceful), Kanen'to:kon could practically see the memories of their fellow soldiers being torn to shreds in the riots only a month ago crossing their faces.

That, at least, he could help with. Before the soldiers could screw up the courage enough to attack, Kanen'to:kon re-notched his arrow, sighted along its line and released it into the officer's neck in one smooth motion. Screams rippled through the crowd, but were quickly snuffed out by another, louder roar. Risking a glance over his shoulder, Kanen'to:kon saw the first few boxes tumbling off the edge of the ship.

Good, he thought, grinning. So far, the mission was going well. Turning back to the soldiers, now milling in confusion and whipping their heads around frantically, he notched another arrow and aimed. Another Regular went down. Then another. And another. And still, the soldiers were looking around frantically, focusing on figuring out where his arrows were coming from so that they didn't notice Aveline slipping out of an alleyway and sliding her hidden blades in between the ribs of two more of their companions. The rest of the soldiers didn't even have time to scream.

Leaning back on his heels, Kanen'to:kon smiled. Quick and easy, just how it should be. Now all they had to do was -

Down on the ground, surrounded by dead bodies, Aveline stiffened. Waving at him, she pointed down another street. Scrambling, he craned his neck, his braids slipping free of his hood. Damn. More Regulars. Stupid, stupid, he thought to himself as he scrambled to get himself into a better positon. How could he think that it would only be a single troop? A crowd this big and loud -

Arrows flew through the air, finding soft flesh and hot blood. But more kept coming. More small squads began to appear out of the woodwork, the alleyways, nowhere - and Kanen'to:kon didn't have an unlimited amount of arrows. He hissed out a curse in his native language when he reached
back to find nothing underneath his questing fingers.

Looking down balefully at the soldiers that were now pushing their way through the crowd, shouting incoherently, Kanen'to:kon pulled his bow back over his head and jumped.

One soldier died from a hidden blade slicing through his spine. Another felt its hot bite against his throat, and yet another lost an eye and his life before Kanen'to:kon found himself having to pull out his tomahawk. The other soldiers, now that they were paying attention to him, surged forward, their faces pale but their eyes determined. It didn't matter. Their bayonets and a few weeks of training were nothing to Kanen'to:kon.

Panting, the soldiers' blood steaming in the air, Kanen'to:kon looked around frantically as he heard a shout. There, on the boats -

He wasn't sure how he had gotten up there, with the decks teeming now with Regulars, but that he did. His hands rapidly became sticky as he fought, warming him like gloves in intervals before the liquid cooled in the night air. He saw Aveline fighting on the deck of the other ship as well, her braids whipping through the air behind her like snakes and her sword their fangs. She was a bloody spirit, come to take vengeance on the living, and so was Kanen'to:kon. And yet still, he could hear the splashes of the tea being thrown overboard.

With a final crack of bone underneath his foot and a scream, Kanen'to:kon found himself slowly floating back to reality, like a drowned body floating to the surface of a river. Cheering rang in his ears. Swaying slightly, he stood up from the crouch he was in and looked around.

Everyone was applauding and cheering. The decks were clear, now, with only him and the Sons of Liberty onboard. All of the soldiers that had gotten on were now either lying dead on the deck or injured and groaning. They had done it. They had succeeded.

A hand clapped against his shoulder made him jump. Turning, his arm tensing to let out his hidden blade, he saw Adams there, smiling up at him.

"We did it!" he said, looking like he was about to dance with joy. "They will not be forgetting this anytime soon, I can promise you that!"

Kanen'to:kon didn't answer, Still in a daze, he looked around to see the other Sons of Liberty smiling at him. "I admit, I had my doubts about you," one said, shaking his head, "but what you and your friend have done for freedom tonight..."

"Here," Adams said, dragging Kanen'to:kon's attention back to him. "This is the last box." He held it out to Kanen'to:kon, like it was a gift. "Fitting that the man behind our success tonight throws the last crate to signify our victory, eh?"

"But Aveline -" Kanen'to:kon murmured, even as he took the box into his arms.

"But nothing." Aveline swung over from the other ship and landed with a thump, gently making her way through the now-crowded deck towards him. "You didn't see yourself tonight, Kanen'to:kon. You took down more of those soldiers than anyone else! You have earned this," she said, smiling up at him.

Kanen'to:kon's heart skipped a beat.

Breathing in deeply, he blinked once and nodded before turning to the crowd on the docks. Raising the crate above his head, he basked in the mob's roar of approval. A sea of faces, smiling up at him and chanting encouragement. Looking beyond the first few rows, he saw more encouragement;
enough to raise a solid lump into his throat suddenly. His lips peeled back into a fierce grin in reply. Still smiling, he reared back to truly throw the crate into the cold, icy ocean when he spotted him.

Templars. Watching from another dock, farther away. With the amount of times that Mistress Scott had shown them sketches of the faces of the Templar's Inner Circle, Kanen'to:kon could have recognized them from behind in a snowstorm. But it wasn't just them that made him pause. Standing at the very end was a horribly familiar figure, tall and straight-backed and holding a half-crushed hat in his hand. With his hair pulled away from his face and dressed in colonist clothes, Kanen'to:kon almost didn't recognize him. But then he picked out the small details, such as the braid beside his face where it always was and the traditional Kanien'ke:ha patterns on the sash around his waist. And then he turned his head to say something to the man beside him, causing the lantern-light to pick out the necklace made of bear claws around his neck.

The crate tumbled into the harbour as Kanen'to:kon looked at Ratonhnhake:ton. His friend, and now, evidently, a Templar.
Connor winced as he stared down at the brown water in the tub. He knew that he had ridden hard to get to New York as soon as possible, but he hadn't realized just how much dirt he had accumulated! He would definitely have to apologize to Ellen when he came downstairs for dirtying her tub so much.

He couldn't help it though. After close to a year in the frontier, constantly dealing with the other nations and tribes, making promises and struggling to follow through, his father had finally seen fit to ask for him to come home. How could he not ride as hard as he could to return? He supposed that he should just be grateful that Ellen was so kind as to let him bathe before seeing him.

Speaking of which...

A knock at the door jerked Connor out of his reverie. Hurriedly wrapping the towel around his waist, he smoothed his still-wet hair back from his face. "Come in," he called.

The door creaked open as Ellen poked her head inside. She blushed slightly before she came in holding a bundle of cloth close to her chest. "Well," she said, smiling, "I'm glad to see that you didn't drown in the tub then. We were a bit worried downstairs."

"I am sorry," Connor said, ducking his head a little. "That was not my intent."

"Oh, pish," Ellen said, waving the apology away like a fly. "Just a joke between friends, Connor. In any case, I just came up to give you some new clothes." She held up her hand again to stop his protests. "It's no trouble at all, really," she said. "You've been such a good customer for years - I couldn't let you go back to your father looking like a beggar! Or worse, a sausage in too small a casing!"

Connor's lips quirked into a quick smile at his friend's derisive sniff. He could admit that his clothing had taken a terrible beating out in the frontier. On top of that, he had found himself bulking up, adding muscle on top of muscle until his seams were straining. He couldn't blame her for eyeing his new body, designs undoubtedly spinning in her head. He was sure that she was already planning a new suit for him, and that the clothing she was handing over right now was nothing more than what she had lying around than anything that she truly considered to be up to snuff.

The next words out of her mouth confirmed what he already thought. "Now, this isn't the best clothing, but it's clean and should fit you, which is more than I can say for the rags you came in wearing. Put them on and we can give you something to eat before you go as well."  

"Oh, that is not necessary, Ellen," Connor said, accepting the clothes that she thrust to his chest, "my father will -"

Ellen flicked him with her apron playfully. "It's not a necessity, Connor," she said, "but it is a pleasure. Now come on down when you're ready, Maria's been dying to hear your stories again." And with that, she slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her firmly.

Connor sighed and shook his head. He would only eat enough to keep from insulting Ellen, he promised himself. Placing the clothing down on the table by the door, he pulled off his towel and neatly folded it before gently hanging it over the back of the table's chair. Picking up the piece of clothing on top of the pile, he shook it out. It was a clean white shirt, very broad in the shoulders, with Ellen's tiny stitches around the collar and armholes. Pulling it over his head, it was still a bit
tight around the shoulders and very loose around the stomach. Undoubtedly, it had originally been for some fat old tavern-keeper, but Connor was thankful regardless. There were very few colonist men with shoulders as broad as his and a narrow waist.

A simply dark blue vest and black coat completed the outfit. Connor's original hat, black as well, had thankfully survived the trip relatively intact. Smoothing his hands over his chest, he then slipped out of the room and headed downstairs towards the kitchen as Ellen had ordered. The smell of bacon and the sound of Maria's chattering greeted him as he poked his head into the small room, bringing a smile to his face.

Doctor White and Maria were sitting at the table while Ellen fussed over the bacon by the fire. Maria was smiling, apple-cheeked, and rambling on about some small adventure that she had been on to a patiently-nodding Doctor White. The doctor himself was looking well; after he had finished treating Ellen for her injuries all those years ago, he had ended up renting a room in the house from her. Apparently he had become fond of the city during her convalescence and decided that he would rather set up his practice here than in Boston, and Ellen had decided that she could certainly use the extra income from renting out a room after Quincent had 'turned up' dead in the harbour.

"Good morning," Connor said, stepping into the kitchen.

"Ah, Connor," Doctor White said, straightening in his seat, "it's good to see you aga-"

"CONNOR!" shrieked Maria, flinging herself into his arms and cutting off the doctor. "Where have you been! Master Kenway only told us that you were out on business, but I heard you were in the frontier! Did you talk to your tribe again? I heard that there's been a lot of dangerous stuff going on out there, people are disappearing -"

"Maria!" Ellen snapped, pausing mid-flip of the bacon, "Let Connor sit down and eat something, he's been riding hard for days to get back home."

Her face turning red, Maria hastily let go of Connor's front, flopping back down into her seat. Gingerly, Connor smoothed the wrinkles out of his clothes and sat down on one of the table's free chairs. "It is alright," he soothed the clearly-embarassed girl, "I am not that tired. I spent last night in an inn."

The derisive noise that Ellen made let everyone in the room know what she thought about inns.

"Really," Connor insisted. "And yes, Maria, I did talk to my tribe," he said, carefully ignoring the second question she had asked, "they are doing quite well." But they were worried; very worried. His uncle had wanted to buy more weapons from Master Johnson, and the Clan Mother hadn't contradicted him. The men that had been preying on his people all these years were becoming bolder by the day, apparently, and Otetieni was travelling more and more to talk with the other tribes. He had even been reaching out to nations outside of their own for alliances and mutual defence, something that had not been done since the days that the Haudenosaunee had first allied together under Aionwatha in the name of peace and harmony. But that was not something that he would burden Ellen and Doctor White with, let alone Maria.

Smiling, he softly thanked Ellen as she slid a few rashers of bacon onto the plate in front of him. So much for only eating a little. Still, it would be impolite to decline now. Mentally sighing, Connor added bacon to his grocery shopping list. He would have to give it to Maria rather than Ellen - she would accept it with far less protest than her mother.

Digging into the meat, Connor also accepted a slice of bread and half an apple as they were offered to him. The meal was simple, yes, nothing like the spreads that the cook put on the table every
morning when he was home with his father, but it was still good, hearty food. The company was
good too; Doctor White's practice was flourishing, Ellen was getting more orders than ever, and
apparently Maria could climb trees better than any boy in the neighbourhood. Soon, though, the
food was gone and regrettably, Connor had to be on his way. Standing up from the table, he
couldn't help but feel reluctant to leave; it had been far too long since he was able to sit down with
friends outside of the Order.

And knowing his father, he would undoubtedly be sent off again soon on some mission.

Helping Ellen clean up, he ignored her insistence that he didn't have to and set to washing the
dishes as Maria begged to be allowed to go outside. Surprisingly, Doctor White joined him, drying
each dish as Connor finished scrubbing it free of grease and crumbs.

"So," Doctor White said, "Ellen and I were wondering whether or not you would be in town say,
three months from now."

Connor paused mid-scrub and looked at Doctor White, raising an eyebrow. "I am not sure," he said
carefully. "I may have to leave again soon for business. Why?"

Doctor White continued to rub the already-dry dish in his hands, not quite looking at Connor.
"Well," he said, hedging, "we were just wondering if you could do us a favour."

"What sort of favour?" Connor's head was already churning; did they perhaps need a particular
drug? A particular bolt of silk? They had asked for that sort of thing before, in return for a new
cloak or some free treatment when one of the many colonist diseases swept through the city. It
wouldn't be too hard to do that; even with the dumping of the tea nearly two years ago, his personal
finances and his business had recovered enough to do some small favour for friends.

"Would you be a witness for us?"

Connor's thoughts halted and his brow furrowed. "A witness? For what?"

Behind them, Ellen chuckled. "Oh Connor," she said, smiling at the two of them as they looked
over their shoulders at him, "for our wedding."

"Wedding?" Connor said, the pieces not quite coming together. Then it clicked, and he looked
between the two of them. "You two?"

"No, Connor, between Ellen and the table," Doctor White said, rolling his eyes fondly. "Yes,
between us."

Warmth bloomed in Connor's stomach. He grinned. "Congratulations!" he said cheerfully.

And then Ellen and Doctor White were smiling as well, looking at each other with so much
affection that Connor felt honoured to be in their presence. "We've been thinking it over for a long
while now," Ellen said, reaching out and twining her arm with his, "trying not to rush into anything
."

"But our feelings, they just haven't stopped. So we decided to go for it," Doctor White said. "And
we thought, since you were the one to bring us together, it would only be fit if you were one of our
legal witnesses."

"I would be honoured," Connor said, "truly." Reaching out with still-wet hands, he clapped them
both on the shoulders. "I will let my father know so that I can keep the date clear."
Of course, it was not quite that easy.

Standing in front of the door to his childhood home, Connor knew that his father, as kind as he could be at times, still put the Order above everything else. If he decided that Connor had to be off on a mission that day, then Connor would have no choice but to be off on a mission that day. Still, if he knew that it was Ellen and Doctor White asking - those two who had faithfully helped them for so many years, making clothing perfect for their work and stitching up their injuries with no questions asked - then surely, surely he would be reasonable?

Well, there was only one way to find out, he supposed. Reaching out, he opened the door and slipped into the house.

A wave of familiarity swept over him. Closing the door behind him, he found himself shutting his eyes for a moment and breathing in the familiar smells of the house. Baked bread, cooling in the kitchen. The soap used to clean the halls. The faint, underlying tang of metal that had simply sunk into the bones of the house over the years of his father's lessons. Connor had never realized, in all of his time out on the frontier, just how much he had missed home.

Opening his eyes, he felt his lips curl slightly at the edges into a fond smile. Looking around, even in just this foyer, he could remember his little misadventures over the years.

He had knocked over a vase on that table one day when he was in a hurry to get to the salle in the basement. It had shattered into hundreds of pieces and his father had made him glue it back together before placing it in his room as a reminder to not be too hasty in his actions. Another time, when he was younger, he had slid down the handrail of the stair and fallen off at the end, bruising his tailbone. His father had been more sympathetic then, but not by much. Connor had still gotten a lecture on not doing things that he had expressly been forbidden from doing, but later his father had held him and read him stories from a large book that had been in his library until he fell asleep.

"Excuse me, sir, but may I ask what you are doing here?"

Blinking, pulled out of his reverie, Connor turned his head to see a tiny brunette, dressed in a maid's apron, standing stiffly at attention in the doorway that lead to the sitting room. Her round face was scrunched up into a suspicious look.

"My apologies," Connor said, ducking his head respectfully towards the maid and taking off his hat, "are you new to this household?"

The girl's eyes narrowed further and her nostrils flared. "Perhaps I am, sir," she said. "What does it matter to you?"

He swallowed back a laugh. "I simply wanted to make sure," he said, keeping his voice soft and steady. "I did not want to cause a scene over you not recognizing the son of your employer."

Perhaps it was a tad cruel, but Connor had to stifle a laugh the dawning look of horror that crossed her face as she realized what he had said. She began to sputter, her face turning red. Raising up a hand, Connor stopped her.

"It is alright, miss," he said, "as you told me, you are knew. I have been gone for business for over a year now, it is no surprise that you would not recognize me."

Her chin wobbling, she gulped and nodded her head, relief flashing through her eyes. "Yes, sir," she said, casting her eyes down and folding her hands in front of her. "I'm afraid that I had heard that the master of the house had a half-Indian son and seen the portrait, but -"
Connor shrugged. "I recently went through another growth spurt," he said, keeping his tone friendly. "And I am wearing borrowed clothes. My other ones were rather ruined after a year in the frontier."

"The frontier!" the girl gasped, her head snapping up and her hands covering her mouth. "Oh my!"

Connor smiled awkwardly and shrugged again. He didn't want to reveal too much, but the girl was not leaving. Thankfully, a very familiar voice suddenly rang out.

"Miss Edith, do you not have any chores from Miss Potts?"

Both of their heads turned and looked up to the head of the stairs. There, standing at the top, was Haytham Kenway, his father.

Quickly casting an eye over his father, Connor smiled. The older man may have silver hair, but Connor could tell from the way that he held himself he was in good health as usual. Wearing a dark red waistcoat and black breeches, he was as lean and intimidating as ever.

"Or," he drawled, dragging out the 'r' sound slightly, "have you finished so early that you have the time to pester my son?"

Connor shot his father a reproachful look. The girl had just been doing her job in making sure that he was not some vagrant off the streets. His father ignored his look as always, though. The girl squeaked at the look he was shooting her and quickly hurried off to the kitchens after a quick curtsy towards him.

Shaking his head, Connor began to make his way up the stairs. "You did not need to do that," he said.

Haytham snorted. "She's far too easily distracted," he informed him, turning on his heel. "And in any case, you've just made your way home for the first time in a year. An interrogation is the last thing you need. Now follow me, I have an assignment for you."

Obediently doing just that, Connor disobediently rolled his eyes as they made their way to his father's office. So as opposed to an interrogation from a maid, he instead needed an interrogation from his father? If he didn't know that his father would hear him, he would have sighed.

Instead, he just stood to attention with his hands folded behind him as his father sat down at his overflowing desk with a grunt.

"Well then," he said, "we might as well get business out of the way. I've already read the reports you sent back; they were illuminating. Has Otetieni succeeded in any of his bids with the other tribes so far?"

"Some within the confederacy are not happy with what Otetieni has been saying," Connor said slowly, "but far more agree. We need to be more organized and closely connected to drive back the raiders. When I had left, the Abenaki and Lenape seemed to be closing a deal with us for mutual defense. Otetieni's goal of an overall government was not quite as accepted, but he was still offering it. From what I understand, he was suggesting that we allow them in with their own representatives rather than with one of the Six Tribes representing them. He was getting support for it too, especially from the younger warriors. When I left, we were voting on extending the offer to the Shawnee as well."
His father hummed and steepled his fingers in front of his face, looking thoughtful. "So the Six Tribes might become the Eight or Nine tribes, eh? Or even the Hundred," he murmured, seemingly to himself. "That would certainly shake things up on the frontier." His eyes were narrowed, and he was looking dangerously contemplative in a way that Connor had seen before.

"But it would also be easier for the Order to deal with one united group rather than several hundred," Connor hastily reminded him. His father got along fine with his uncle, but he knew that if Haytham got it into his head that the new Confederation was dangerous to the Order, then his uncle would likely die with his dream unrealized. And perhaps it was selfish, perhaps it was working at cross-purposes with the goals of the Templar Order, but Connor knew that his people didn't have a chance against the colonists if they kept allowing themselves to be played off of each other.

His father hummed again and didn't reply. Instead, he simply looked Connor over before sighing and taking his hands away from his face.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it's rather a moot point until there's something solid out there to talk to." Settling back in his chair, he picked a piece of paper off of his desk and held it out. "In any case, you won't be going back there any time soon. You're needed in Boston by Major Pitcairn."

Taking the paper, Connor glanced it over and raised his eyebrows. "What, precisely, does Major Pitcairn need me for?" he asked. "He does not say in his letter, just that he needs someone with my skills."

Haytham straightened a pile of paper absentmindedly. "There are a few unsavoury types running around in the land surrounding Boston," he said dryly. "I believe you know of them; the Sons of Liberty, they call themselves. Their leaders, Hancock and Adams are hiding out there."

Connor's grip wrinkled the paper. The Sons of Liberty. The group of fools and madmen behind half of the troubles afflicting the colonies and preventing a peaceful split from England, they were the ones that had dumped the tea from his first joint business deal with Master Johnson into the Boston harbour. They were the reason why he was not able to do more to help his people with their troubles.

"He needs them killed?"

His father's lips twisted. "No," he said, "if that was what had to happen he would have just hired some thugs looking for easy money." Leaning forward, he stood up and tucked his hands behind him, walking out from behind his desk. "What he needs is something far more difficult; he needs them captured and brought to trial."

"Trial?" Connor muttered, looking over the letter again. "For them?"

"At this point, it's simply too suspicious if they have a sudden accident," Haytham said. "So, we plan to have them in a proper trial, then hung for treason. A nice and legal way to get rid of our rabble-rousers."

Connor narrowed his eyes but nodded. He would much rather just kill them, but he could see the point of the trial. Folding the paper up and tucking it into his coat pocket, a thought struck him.

"Father," he asked, "how long will this assignment take?"

His father raised an eyebrow. "It depends on whether or not Pitcairn has narrowed down their location by the time you arrive," he said. "Why do you ask?"
"I saw Ellen and Doctor White today," Connor said slowly, "and they informed me that they planned to get married in three month's time. They asked me to be one of their legal witnesses then."

Haytham grunted. "Congratulations for them," he said, "but the assignment will take as long as it takes." Connor wilted slightly and sympathy flashed across the older man's eyes. "Connor," he said, sighing, "Ratonhnhake:ton, Pitcairn sounded like he was close to knowing their precise location. In any case, he already knows the general area that they are in. So long as the roads stay open, you will most likely be back in time for the White's wedding."

Connor flushed slightly and ducked his head. "I am sorry," he said, "they have just been so good to us these past years, it seemed a pity that I could not do this small thing for them."

Haytham shook his head, a slight smile on his lips. "Connor, I am sure that they would be happy just with a nice present in any case. If you wish, you can leave tomorrow, or you can relax for a few days. Miss Potts has missed you." Crossing the room, he opened the door to the study. "I am sure that by this point she already has a tray of your favourite foods ready and waiting in the sitting room, in any case. Go and say hello to her as well and think things over."

Connor nodded and obediently went to leave the room, only to be stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

"And Connor?" Haytham said.

Connor turned to face his father, who now had a soft smile hinting at the corners of his mouth. The older man held out his arms, and after a moment of hesitation, Connor dove into the proffered hug.

"Welcome home."
Riding into Boston, Connor kept his head bowed as he rode past the guards at the gates to Boston's main fort. While he was here on business with Major Pitcairn, that was no guarantee that the soldiers under the older Scotsman would welcome him. And creating a disturbance ran the risk of alerting spies that he had arrived.

So even as the echoes of the soldiers' growls and theatrical spitting echoed in his ears, he simply clenched his jaw and rode on.

Entering the city, though, his jaw clenched tighter. There was a thick tension in the air as he rode through the oddly-quiet streets. Akweks' hooves clopped against the stone street as he rode past silent stands and stores, echoing against the walls of alleyways that the occasional hunched-over person scurried through. The few people up at this hour picked over what fish and fruit were left over after the winter, but the chill in the air seemed to be keeping most people off the streets and in their homes.

That, and all the soldiers. These Regulars, however, were missing something. Passing by a clump of soldiers standing at one of the arches of the city's covered fishmarket, Connor couldn't help but notice the tension in their frames. How they looked over their shoulders at the people walking around and doing their business with white-knuckled grips on their muskets. He very nearly raised an eyebrow at that; most of the soldiers he had met were incredibly confident, swaggering around as if they owned the streets and everyone on it. For them to look so nervous said many things about the situation in the Boston, and none of them were good.

He didn't have time to investigate, though. Weaving his way through the crowds, he headed towards the fort where Major Pitcairn was based according to his father. Despite the tension that was making all the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, Connor made his way there with no issue - not even being stopped by some of the clearly jumpy soldiers that were posted at regular intervals. It was only at the gates leading into the fortified building that he was finally stopped.

"Halt," said one of the soldiers, keeping a tight grip on his musket. His voice was oddly quiet; usually soldiers were louder, in Connor's experience. "State your business."

"I am here to visit Major Pitcairn; he has requested my help with a problem of his."

The soldier pressed his lips together into a thin line, his eyes flicking towards the people that were walking nearby. A small twitch of his head had the other guard subtly shifting his position to better bring his gun up into a more ready position. Connor tensed slightly and was thankful for the thickness of his coat hiding his body language. He was sure that it would not take much to end up in a fight with the Regulars if he was not careful.

Slowly reaching into his coat, he watched the soldier to make sure that he was seeing that he was not reaching for a gun. The man's throat bobbed, but he didn't make a move to bring up his own gun, so Connor counted it as a win. Pulling out the letter that Major Pitcairn had sent along with his request for help, he held it out for the man to take.

The man nearly ripped it out of his hand and danced away like a nervous horse. As he looked over it, Connor sat back in his saddle slightly and peered through the open gate.

There was a fair bit of movement; men were rushing back and forth, practicing their marching and their marksmanship. Others were loading large wagons full of crates and bags of what Connor
could only assume were supplies. And weapons, he added mentally as he noticed a Regular weaving through the crowd with an arm full of muskets.

Finally, the soldier finished reading through the letter and handed it back with a grunt. Shifting his gun into the crook of his arm but not taking his eyes off of Connor, he jerked his head towards the gate.

"Go ahead then," he said. "Major's expectin' you."

Connor nodded graciously and gently nudged Akweks into a walk. Heading into the fort, his impression of a bestirred anthill only increased as he noticed large barrels of what could only be gunpowder being rolled out of the fort's powder magazine. Guiding his faithful horse through the chaos, he dismounted in front of the main headquarters and tied Akweks to a nearby post before walking up to the rather battered door and knocking firmly.

"Come in," came the crisp, accented tones of Major Pitcairn.

Letting himself in, Connor blinked slightly to acclimate his eyes to the dimness of the building. The door itself led directly into the main room of the building, a mixture of a kitchen and war room. Standing at the head of a table overflowing with maps was the Major, and by him -

"Clipper?" Connor said, a smile spreading across his face.

The short-haired man was dressed as he always was in dun-coloured clothes. A slouch hat, half of its brim pinned up, lay against his back, kept from falling to the ground by a ratty-looking piece of string. And of course, his rifle was in his hands. Rather than being pointed at anybody, though, it was simply resting in the crook of his arm.

"Sir!" he greeted cheerfully with a small wave, "It's good to see you again!"

"It is good to see you as well," Connor replied.

Pitcairn grunted slightly from where he was still hunched over the maps.

"And it is good to see you, too, Major Pitcairn," Connor said quickly, his cheeks burning.

The Major's head jerked up and for a moment, he looked confused. Then understanding crossed his features and he straightened. "Ah, no," he said, "that grunt was not for you two lads. Just my own frustration with Adams and Hancock."

Connor's mood, so quickly buoyed up by the unexpected appearance of Clipper, plummeted back down again at the reminder of the so-called 'Sons of Liberty'. "What is the problem?" he asked. "Have they not been found?"

Pitcairn hummed and rubbed his chin as Clipper shifted uncomfortably beside him. "Well, both yes and no, Connor. I think that Mister Wilkinson can explain that better than me, though."

"They're a damn slippery pair, that's what they are," Pitcairn said, slapping his hand back down onto the table. "And it doesn't help that half the damn colony seems to be bound and determined to hide them from justice." Shaking his head, he turned away from the maps. "But I didn't call you here to complain about my own problems."
Taking off his hat, Connor shifted into a parade rest position, patiently waiting for the distracted man to gather his thoughts.

"My plan is simple," Pitcairn said after a moment. "You and Mister Wilkinson will travel during the night and capture our two fugitives, bringing them back to face the courts. Meanwhile, my men and I will be moving in the same direction under the excuse that we are disarming the rebels by confiscating the weapons that they've been hiding in the area."

Connor couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "They are so well armed?" he asked, alarmed.

Pitcairn shrugged, looking old. "Not so much," he said, "but the Assassins have been active lately, and helping the rebels with their efforts, especially in the Lexington-Concord area. If the Order is to have any chance of ending this all before any bloodshed starts, you two must succeed at your mission. Adams and Hancock must face trial and be convicted; without their heads, the rebels will fall apart."

The Assassins. Connor clenched his jaw.

How he hated them! All of their attempts on his life, their alliance with the men who had nearly caused his business to be a stillborn; he would gladly kill any of them that got in his way on this mission.

(Well, muttered a little, easily-ignored voice in his head, maybe not any Assassin. The one that had thrown the last crate into the harbour, who had looked so very familiar; that one would be interrogated, then killed.)

It didn't take a genius to realize what Pitcairn was saying. "So your half of the operation is just a distraction then," Connor murmured. His head was already summoning up what he knew about his targets when Pitcairn shrugged.

"Well, yes and no," he said ruefully. "The rebels do have weapons there and they do need to be disarmed. It just so happens that such a large operation would serve as a good distraction as well."

"But would it not be just as good for there to be no hints that we are about to strike at all?"

Pitcairn shook his head. "There's a leak in the army anyways," he said. "Impossible to plug them all up. Everyone in this damned city knows that an attack has to come, and soon; so long as everyone thinks that this is our push, they won't pay attention to you two as they'll be too busy trying to stop me."

A risky plan. The Assassin's weren't fools. But Connor saw the wisdom in his honorary uncle's plan. "In that case," he said, bowing slightly to the Major, "Clipper and I should start our own preparations."

"Ah, but before you go -" Pitcairn said, turning back to the table of maps. Rummaging through the mess, he quickly pulled out a folded sheet of paper and held it out towards Connor. "A letter saying that you're on Army business for me," he said at the questioning look Connor shot towards him. "It will get you through any checkpoints you might get caught in without any fuss."

"Thank you," Connor said, taking the paper. "Truly. This will make things easier."

But Pitcairn was nodding distractedly, already turning back to his maps. And so with a quick jerk of his head to his old friend, the two of them slipped outside.
Slipping away from the house with Clipper by his side was easy; everyone, in seemed, was up and about preparing for the push into Lexington and Concord the next day and therefore far too busy to pay any attention to people leaving the fort. Connor wasn't sure, but he was rather dryly certain as to how Pitcairn's suspected spies got their information out to their contacts.

Though with the sheer amount of people streaming in and out, he could also see why Pitcairn was unable to pin any one person down as a leak. Even with the guards, people came in and out regularly from the fort, by themselves or with large wagons hooked up to horses. Looking over them with an experienced eye, Connor could name off several different ways people could smuggle information out, not including simply memorizing the information and repeating it.

Sighing, he turned away from the fort and gently clucked his tongue, urging Akweks forward. It was not his problem, he reminded himself sternly. He had his mission and his timeline. Now all he had to do was plan it out and execute it.

"What's wrong, sir?" asked Clipper, sitting on his own light dun horse and matching his speed.

"You do not need to call me sir out here, Clipper," Connor said, summoning a smile. "We have been friends for years."

His cheeks reddening slightly, and not from the chill in the spring air, Clipper shrugged and looked down at his reins. "Sorry Connor," he said, "it just doesn't feel right, calling you that in front of our bosses. I mean, they've known you for how long? And I'm just some sort of backwoods boy -"

"You are not just some 'backwoods boy', you are the best shot in the Order!" Connor protested. "I have heard my father say so many times!"

"Well, maybe," Clipper replied, "but still, it's all just a bit intimidating sometimes, rubbing shoulders with all these important people."

"You should not be," Connor said firmly. "You are an excellent shot and a good friend. Regardless of what people may or may not say, there is no one else I would rather have at my side at times like this."

A hesitant smile peeked out from the corners of Clipper's mouth. "Thank you, Connor," he said gratefully. Looking up from his saddle, he dropped his reins to point. "There's the inn that I've been staying in. The proprietress likes me; she'll give us privacy for the planning."

Connor nodded, satisfied. "Good," he said.

Once inside, after the proprietress had brought them tea and told them to call if they needed, no, really, wink wink, they settled down to properly plan.

"So you've managed to narrow it down this far?" Connor asked, pointing at the map that Clipper had spread out on top of the small table that was in the room.

Clipper nodded. "Yes," he said, "it was damn hard, though, if you don't mind me saying so. Damn near everyone here is clammed up tighter than a stuck door; everyone knows that something big is about to happen. Took a lot of sleight of hand to keep from getting completely pissed every time I tried to find information - no one trusts someone that doesn't drink."

"I don't doubt it," Connor replied. And he didn't. While he and his father did not drink much, he knew that outside of their house it was one of the colonists' favourite pastimes. Even the women. Personally, he couldn't understand it; taking care of Hickey after his benders had taken care of any desire he felt towards trying out the ale he loved so much.
"The Major knows that it is impossible to keep such a large movement of troops hidden - that is why he has us, though."

Clipper shook his head, though. "Not like that," he said patiently. "It's been like this for weeks."

Connor wrinkled his brow in confusion. "People have known of our plans that far in advance?"

"No, no. What I mean is, well," Clipper hesitated, searching for the words. "It's like the air before lightning strikes. The rebels have been pushing for weeks now and everyone who isn't a half-wit knows that there's going to be a reply. Everyone's waiting for the other shoe to drop and is wound up tight waiting for it. Honestly, it reminds me of what it was like before the riots last year."

Connor pursed his lips, worried. "You think that this might not work, then?"

But relievingly, Clipper shook his head. "No, no," he said, "it's all about relieving that tension. So long as something happens, we should be okay."

"Alright," Connor said. But Clipper's words had left a few reservations in his heart. Pushing them to one side, he boxed them up and placed them on a dusty shelf in his mind. He did not have time for doubts. The Order's plan did not have time for his doubts.

"So then," he said, looking over the maps, "if we know where they are, then, the question becomes how do we get them back? Even with Major Pitcairn's letter of confidence, speed is of the essence. We only have a night for this."

"Well," Clipper said, "I also have a map of the patrols that are usually in the area - not from the Major," he said at Connor's questioning look, "but from my own two eyes. I figured that knowing what their patrols should be can't beat knowing what their actual patrols are."

"A good idea," Connor praised, taking the paper that Clipper handed to him and rolling it out on top of the other map. Sketched in the neat if slightly clumsy lines, Clipper's map was not quite as nice as the one that they had brought from the fort. It took up only half of the paper it was on, actually, and was marked up with other lines in a different-coloured ink, with small numbers scrawled beside them -

He turned to look at his friend. "Are these times?" he asked, half-incredulous. Clipper beamed at him.

"Yep!" he said happily. "Took a good few weeks, but I got all the average times the patrols took and at what times."

"Clipper, this is -" Connor shook his head in amazement. "This is incredible. It makes things so much easier." Laying it down, he smoothed it out slightly and began to compare it to the first, more complete map. "It will be much easier to figure out where to go to avoid the patrols now."

"Aye, we can be in and out and back for a celebratory drink by sunrise," Clipper said.

Connor nodded in agreement, until a thought struck him. "But," he said, slowly, "even with all of this, dragging a struggling person is difficult at the best of times, let alone when we are trying to avoid attention."

"So are they."

"Yes, but aren't they working with the Assassin's nowadays? We don't know if any of them will realize what's going on and come after us. Regulars are no match for them."
Clipper started slightly; clearly this hadn't occurred to him either. "Aye," he said chewing his lip. "Well, what if they were unconscious?"

"Then we would have to drag around dead weight," Connor reminded him. "And we could hardly just flinging them over the backs of our horses like packages."
Clipper's brow wrinkled. "Pity we can't just have them come quietly," he noted.

"Someone else, perhaps, would be more reasonable in the face of defeat," Connor noted. "But I do not think that that is the sort of people that Adams and Hancock are."

Clipper nodded gloomily and heaved a great sigh. "Pity we can't get a carriage on short notice," he noted, "then we could just shove them in and be on our way."

A similar thought had crossed Connor's mind as well before he had dismissed it. The idea of simply putting the two troublemaking rebels into one of those rickety little carriages that were popular amongst the upper class of Boston was amusing, in a way. They, undoubtedly roughed up, and he and Clipper, glaring at each other as they made their way back to the city. But both of them would be needed to make sure that the two did not escape or, if they were unconscious, fall and injure themselves. Pitcairn had made it clear that he wanted the two of them good enough to stand trial and sympathy for injuries would hurt the Templar's chances of squashing the violence. A carriage would attract notice, too. Outside of cities or the southern colonies, it was rare to see a carriage as few could afford such a fancy thing that was only for carting people around in. And that was not even getting into the difficulty of getting their hands on a carriage on such short notice; even those that were for hire were usually strictly for use within the city or only went between two points. Sitting down on the room's bed with a thump, Connor scratched at his temple and tried to think. Regardless of what happened, they needed some way better than just their horses to get the two men back to the city to stand trial for treason.

Outside, the noise level had rose slightly along with the sun. People were talking a little louder now, more confident underneath the sun. Connor could hear horses being ridden past the building, their hooves loud on the cobbled stones to his sensitive ears. Wagons were out as well, being dragged along as their wheels rumbled -

Wagons.

"Clipper," Connor said, sitting bolt upright. "Does the owner of the inn have a wagon, do you know?"

Clipper looked up from where he had been leaning against the desk. "I'm not sure," he said, frowning. "But I can ask. Why?"

"Your idea about the carriage," Connor said, "it was a good one. Even if we can not get one of those, there are plenty of wagons that no one would be suspicious of."

Understanding lit in Clipper's eyes. "Ah," he said, "a wagon's just as good as a carriage for carrying people. It's just less fancy."

Connor nodded. "And if we have a tarp or blanket to put on top of them, we can even hide them from prying eyes."

Clipper grinned, but a flicker of concern passed over his face. "One of us, at least, will still have to sit in the back to make sure that they don't escape though."

"Not if they're unconscious."
"What if they fall off, though? Most wagons don't exactly have a back," Clipper said, looking worried.

Connor tipped his head to one side and thought for a moment. "If they are not conscious, though, it would only really take one person to keep them from falling," he said slowly, the last few pieces of a plan coming together in his head. "And that would give us an excuse to be out at that time. The person in the back could pretend to be drunk, too drunk to stay on a horse."

"And so their friend is taking them home in their wagon so that they can sleep it off," Clipper nodded in understanding. Connor grinned back at him.

He loved it when a plan came together.
Lying in a haycart with your eyes closed, the sounds of the late-afternoon market the next street over muffled by the hay, with a good friend lying beside you had to rank up there with eating when listing the simple pleasures of life, Kanen'to:kon was sure.

It was a day off, he and Aveline had been told. Mistress Scott had told them that while they should be ready to be called upon like always, they were free to do what they wished today at the breakfast table. In the past year, the Boston cell had finally begun to regain enough of its old numbers to not need the two of them to run quite so many missions like before. And so they were now here, lounging quietly and enjoying the rare bit of time off.

Kanen'to:kon reluctantly opened his eyes when he heard Aveline shift slightly beside him. Lying on his side as he was, he immediately saw his friend, her oval face framed by the pale yellow straw and her full lips quirked into a rueful smile.

"Alright," she said, "you've proven your point. This was a good idea."

Kanen'to:kon couldn't help but grin back. "I told you that the straw would keep us warm," he replied, his tone light. She rolled her eyes fondly at him before sitting up, shoving the hay to one side.

"Well," she said, "even if you were right, on the whole I believe that I still prefer a good woolen blanket. Come on. Mistress Scott is probably starting to get worried."

With a theatrical groan, Kanen'to:kon sat up as well, picking bits of straw out of his braids. It had been almost sinfully comfortable in the pile, warm and soft and if not sweet-smelling than definitely not offensive to the nose like some other piles that he had jumped into. He didn't want to leave, but Aveline did make a good point. And she was already out of the wagon and walking away.

Hastily clambering out of the wagon, Kanen'to:kon was forced to trot after her to catch up. Plucking a piece of straw from her hair, he tossed it to the ground.

"Any more in there?" Aveline asked, dusting off her hat.

Tugging out a few more pieces, he threw those to the ground as well. "No," he said, faux-innocent, and grinned at her chuckle.

Settling her hat on her head, the two of them began to weave their way through the various alleyways and backyards on their way back to Mistress Scott's home. The air was still chill, winter not quite banished from the city, but already signs of life were coming through. Small patches of gardens had had their earth turned, and clothing had been hung out to dry.

They were ducking under one particular clothesline when a sharp hiss caught their attention. Looking up towards the sound, Kanen'to:kon blinked in surprise.

It was Joe.

The younger boy, or rather man, frantically gestured at them. Sharing a glance with Aveline, concern shot through him. Had something happened that required them to take a mission today? It would have to be urgent for Mistress Scott to send someone after them.
With those worries in mind, they made their way up to the roof in record time. Crouching by the house's chimney for warmth, Kanen'to:kon rubbed his hands. Judging from the worry on Joe's face, he would need to be ready for tonight's mission.

The other boy had only recently entered the city, having been declared competent enough by Heiman to keep from getting underfoot only last autumn. Mistress Scott, in turn, had taken advantage of his predilection for stealthy assassinations and kept him on assignment after assignment so that the three of them hadn't had much of a chance to catch up on their respective lives.

"My friends," Joe began, hooking a finger on the kerchief that he wore around his face and pulling it down, "there's trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"The sort where everyone has to drop everything and start running around," snapped Joe.

Kanen'to:kon reared back slightly, hurt. He had just asked a question. Guilt passed over Joe's face and he sighed.

"I'm sorry, Ganen," he said, rubbing his scars with his thumb, "I'm just a little jumpy. We didn't have any warning that this was about to happen."

"That what was supposed to happen?" Aveline asked, leaning forward.

"The Templars - Pitcairn - they're making their move," Joe said.

Kanen'to:kon and Aveline shared an alarmed look before turning back to their black-clad friend. "How?" Aveline demanded.

"They're going to march on Lexington and Concord to confiscate the weapons that the rebels have been stockpiling there," Joe replied, looking over his shoulder. "Pitcairn seems to have been planning this for a while. He wants to take out the rebels before they even have a chance to start anything and Mistress Scott is worried that that's going to include arresting all of the Sons of Liberty that are in reach." Turning back, he looked at the two of them seriously. "Most of the cell's going to be busy trying to sabotage and slow down Pitcairn's men, but the Sons still need to be warned. That's what she wants you two to do."

Reaching into a pouch on his belt, he pulled out a tattered and folded piece of paper. "The other rebels are being helped out of town as we speak, but we still have one last person to meet. Since you two know him, she wants you two to get him out without being noticed."

Kanen'to:kon took the paper and unfolded it, nodding professionally along with Aveline. "Alright," he said, scanning over the short note scrawled on the stained and ragged paper, "got it. Paul Revere and his family will be out of town by sunrise tomorrow."

Joe nodded back at them and slipped away without another word, jumping to another roof on his way to what was probably a supply depot or some sort. Tucking the paper into his own pocket, Kanen'to:kon glanced over at Aveline.

"Do you remember Paul Revere?" he asked, letting a little uncertainty enter his voice.

Her nose wrinkled in thought. "He was the one that held the meeting the night of the Tea Party," she said. "I believe he called you a big fellow."

Biting his lip, Kanen'to:kon tried to think back to that night. It was hard to remember much. Not
because it had been a normal mission, or that it hadn't been exciting. Indeed, compared to what
they normally did these days, which was usually wait outside of buildings counting the amount of
people that came in and out during a certain period of time, it had been downright thrilling. No, it
certainly hadn't been a forgettable night. The problem was what he had seen at the very end, when
he was throwing the last box of tea in the harbour.

Ratonhnhake:ton. The person that he had joined the Assassins for; the person who had been
captured and twisted by the Templars, according to the Star-woman that had spoken to him in his
vision during his manhood ceremony. He had been there, standing with the Templars and watching
as they threw Johnson's money into the black icy water, dressed like a colonial man except for the
braids and feathers in his hair, glowering like Kanen'to:kon had been doing it just to hurt him.

The shock of seeing that had very nearly struck him mute for the rest of that evening. Even after
the Templars had turned and left, Ratonhnhake:ton trotting after them like an obedient dog, he
could barely find the words to reply to the Sons of Liberty's congratulations. Luckily, according to
Aveline, the rebels had simply assumed that he was still out of breath from defending him and not
questioned it. Nor had they questioned them disappearing during the first round of drinks back at
one of their homes, accepting Aveline's excuse that it had been an exhausting night for them.
Honestly, Kanen'to:kon could barely even remember telling her about his vision once they had
returned to Mistress Scott's house and collapsed into bed; how he had been sent to protect his
people by saving Ratonhnhake:ton from the Templars. All he could remember was that she took it
surprisingly well, and that she had promised to help him in his quest.

Speaking of which, Aveline was looking at him sympathetically right now, undoubtedly
remembering that night as well.

"Do you need me to take the lead?" she asked.

"Yes," Kanen'to:kon admitted, shrugging lamely. "I don't really - well, you know."

She simply blinked and shrugged a little as well before turning and starting to run. Pushing himself
to his feet, Kanen'to:kon was soon following her over the rooftops of Boston, dodging rooftop
guards and balancing on clotheslines until they finally dropped down into the small backyard of a
little grey house. Straightening their clothes, Aveline reached out and rapped her knuckles firmly
against the weathered door.

Inside, muffled by the walls, they could hear someone moving around. There was a quick, hushed
conversation and just as Aveline reached out to knock again, the door opened.

Standing there was a short, slightly portly red-haired man, looking tense. Peering over his
shoulder, Kanen'to:kon just barely caught the edge of a skirt whipping around a corner. Well. It
was somewhat heartening to see that despite the carelessness the Sons of Liberty sometimes
showed, they still had a few ounces of sense rattling through their heads.

"May I help you?" Revere asked, just a shade too loudly.

"Quiet, Mister Revere," Aveline warned, placing a hand against his chest and pushing him back.
"The walls have ears, and they are most certainly listening. We need to come in."

Stumbling back, the older man looked like he was about to protest for a moment as they squeezed
into the narrow hallway of the house. However, he didn't; instead he just clenched his jaw as
Kanen'to:kon closed the door behind him.

"I'm not sure how much you know about what's going on right now, Mister Revere," Aveline
continued once the door was shut, "but the army is on the move, lead by Major Pitcairn. They are on the move to Lexington and Concord to confiscate the weapons that we have hidden there and we fear that they plan to arrest all of the members of the Sons of Liberty in the city on their way out."

That had Revere paying attention. His eyes bugging out slightly, he sputtered for a moment before finding his voice. "A-arrest us? Why on earth would they do that if they already know where our weapons store is?"

"We do not know for sure," Kanen'to:kon reminded the man, "we just think. It makes sense though; I doubt that they would want to waste time searching each and every house for weapons when they could just get one of the ringleaders to tell them exactly where the guns are."

"Still," Revere said, looking down and shaking his head. Then it snapped up. "Wait," he asked, "what are you doing here then? Would it not be better to stop Pitcairn in his tracks, keep him from crippling us before he gets the chance?"

But Aveline was shaking her head. Kanen'to:kon almost felt sorry for the man. "We are working on that," she said, "but stopping an entire army is difficult, even for people with our skills. Most of our people are tied up sabotaging as many things that the army needs as possible, but even if we stop them this time, they can always try again. So for your safety, I am afraid that we must insist that you and your family leave the city with us."

"Leave entirely?" Revere said weakly. "All of my family, upping and leaving my business behind? I am a silversmith, how would I provide for them?"

"Don't worry," Aveline said, gently taking him by the arm and trying to steer him deeper into the house, "our group will help you."

But now Revere was shaking his head. "No, no," he said, "I cannot. The others - do they know?"

"We have already sent others who can be spared to get you other compatriots out of the city -"

"No!" Revere cried, "I meant the others outside of the city! If you fear that we will be attacked, what is keeping them from danger? I must warn them!"

Kanen'to:kon felt a small note of alarm. Revere was right, but -

"One man would not be able to warn everyone," he said, stepping forward and laying a hand on his shoulder. "They will be alright, I am sure of it."

"And Adams? Hancock?" Revere hissed. "What about them? They are our leaders, if they are captured our entire organization will be brought down!" Twisting around, he grasped Kanen'to:kon's shirt front with white-knuckled hands and looked up at him pleadingly. "Please," he said, "if nothing else, let me go and warn them. If they are caught, they will be executed."

Barely keeping himself from automatically breaking Revere's fingers when he abruptly grabbed his shirt, Kanen'to:kon shot a look over the shorter man's head at Aveline, who shrugged helplessly. He has a point, she managed to say with only a facial expression.

Grinding his teeth, Kanen'to:kon looked back down at Revere's desperate face and took a deep breath.

"Alright," he said, keeping his voice low, "but even if we do that, we still have to get your family out of the city."
"There are two of you, aren't there?" Revere replied. "One of you can come with me to help in case any of the Regulars on patrol out there spot us. The other can help my wife and children escape."

Kanen'to:kon looked up again. A rather bare-bones plan, but, well - hadn't he complained to Aveline before about how the rebels seemed hesitant at times to fully commit themselves to their cause? Hadn't he been annoyed at their seeming reliance on the Assassins doing their dirty work? And here was one that was suggesting that he actually go and try to personally help.

Aveline seemed to realize the same thing as him. She closed her eyes and rubbed them with one hand.

"Alright," she said, speaking for the both of them, "if that is truly what you want to do, then alright. Which one of us do you want to come with you?"

A note of sheepishness entering his face, Revere glanced up towards Kanen'to:kon.

A run and a boatride later, Kanen'to:kon found himself on top of a horse, deeply regretting that he had agreed to Revere's harebrained plan as the man groped at his chest.

He knew that that thought was uncharitable. After all, they were galloping along at quite a speed, and the man had to hold on to something. With the two of them being on one horse, that grip would naturally have to be Kanen'to:kon. But quite frankly with the way that the man was yelling directions in his ear like he was deaf and digging his fingers into his chest and stomach, Kanen'to:kon didn't feel like being charitable.

"You're on the right course now!" Revere shouted, making Kanen'to:kon wince. He wished that they were going slower so that he could let go of the reins and rub his ear.

Finally, though, they were on their way to Adams and Hancock. Kanen'to:kon hadn't enjoyed the detours that they had had to take, warning the others, even if he saw the necessity of it. He had seen far more white colonist flesh on display than he ever wanted to at the last house. So as they made their way towards the house where Adams and Hancock were hiding, all he could think was that he hoped they would be at the very least fully dressed.

Slowing down as they finished crossing the field and entered the trees, Kanen'to:kon kept his eyes and ears open. Staying away from the roads as they were, he did not relish the idea of being ambushed by Templar agents scouting things ahead of time for Pitcairn and his master. On top of that, the branches of the trees that they were passing through were still quite bare, their new leaves just growing in, keeping them half-exposed to the main road that they were following.

There was no one outside, though. Only the occasional scuffle of some small animal making its way through the underbrush and a few calls from night-active birds disturbed them as they rode along.

Why was it so quiet?

"We're veering off -" Revere's voice was cut off as Kanen'to:kon slammed his elbow into the other man's gut. Bending over, he clawed at Kanen'to:kon's chest as he sputtered for breath, retching slightly.

"Quiet!" Kanen'to:kon ordered, his voice not rising above a harsh whisper. "Do you not hear that?" His eyes darted around the dim forest.

Still coughing, Revere straightened and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Hear what?"
he asked, his voice strained.

"Nothing." Kanen'to:kon's eyebrows furrowed.

"Isn't that good?" asked Revere, thankfully far quieter than before.

"Not necessarily," Kanen'to:kon replied, still scanning the trees in front of them. "How many patrols did we find while warning the others?" He felt Revere stiffen behind him, the full implications of what he was saying hit him. "Exactly," he murmured, cutting the other man off with a gesture.

"We still need to go, though," Revere said. "I can't leave them there to get captured, everything will fall apart without them."

Kanen'to:kon bit his lip, his nerves shrieking at him. Why oh why had he agreed to this? And why was Revere making such a good point? He was not fond of the Sons of Liberty; any feelings of that sort had died when the group had appeared at what the colonists were calling the Boston Tea Party in those fantasy Indian clothes. But Revere was correct in saying that everything would fall apart without the two. Even if the rebels were able to continue on, Adams had been the main force behind their alliance with the Assassins. He had also smoothed over the many little irritations as both groups had come into contact more and more, keeping tempers down and solving disputes.

But at the same time, as confident as Kanen'to:kon had gotten with his fighting talent, he was not prepared to fight off a full Templar or British ambush. Since he had been on his day off, he was only lightly armed with his tomahawk and hidden blades. It would only take one Regular managing to get his musket up to kill him.

"Mister Ganendoego," Revere said softly from behind him, "please. I know that our organizations have had their disagreements, but please. Do you really want Adams and Hancock to be hanged for treason?"

Kanen'to:kon gritted his teeth. Behind him, Revere was silent, only a fine tremor running through his hands to show how worried he was.

Finally, with his gut churning, Kanen'to:kon kicked the sides of the horse, urging it forward. Behind him, Revere sighed explosively, but thankfully stayed silent otherwise.

Closer to the house, they went back onto the road. Kanen'to:kon's nerves continued to shriek at him as they came closer and closer to the house, screaming that something was wrong. Sliding off, he tied the reins to a nearby tree branch and gestured for Revere to stay.

"You will just get in the way," he said sternly as the other man opened his mouth to complain.

"Stay here and be ready to run if it turns out that this is an ambush."

Turning back towards the house, Kanen'to:kon crept forward. Sidling along the side of the house, he dismissed the thought of entering by the front. Only an amateur or someone with a death wish would enter that way, as that would be where any ambush would be focused. Instead, he headed towards one of the back windows and began to jimmy it open with a hidden blade.

Once inside, the feeling that something was wrong only intensified. It was completely pitch black, the only light coming in from the windows. There were no sounds of people sleeping, no warmth from a recently extinguished fire; in fact, looking at the fireplace in the room, there were no banked embers or ash.

Kanen'to:kon's foot hit something. He looked down.
It was a chair, lying where it was toppled, with something on it glinting in the moonlight. Crouching down, he reached out to touch the shining substance, only for some of it to rub off on his fingertips. Bringing it to his nose, his sniffed.

The coppery scent of blood filled his nose. Springing to his feet, Kanen'to:kon looked around the room, new knowledge filling his mind. The chair, the lack of a fire, how quiet it had been.

The Templars had gotten here first.
Kanen'to:kon charged headlong along the road, no longer caring if they were seen by the Regulars. Nothing mattered. With Adams and Hancock taken, he had to get back to the rendezvous point and warn everybody that the Templars had the leaders of the Sons of Liberty.

Revere, his fingers digging into Kanen'to:kon's chest, placed his mouth near his ear. "Where are we going?" he shouted, the wind whipping the words away as they left his mouth. "There are still more that need to be warned!"

"I need to tell the others that Adams and Hancock are gone!" Kanen'to:kon shouted back. "We need to regroup and figure out what we're going to do! The others can wait!"

"What?!" Revere's fingers were like claws. "We are more than just Adams and Hancock!"

"But Adams and Hancock are your leaders!" Kanen'to:kon snapped. "They are the ones that we negotiated with - woah!" Kanen'to:kon clamped his legs down around the horse's middle as Revere lunged for the reins and pulled. The horse shrieked and reared wildly, its eyes rolling in terror as Kanen'to:kon fought to keep it under control.

As soon as its hooves slammed back down onto the road Kanen'to:kon was shushing it and patting its neck soothingly, trying to calm it down. Slowly, its skin twitching underneath his thighs, it calmed, snorting and puffing until Kanen'to:kon felt secure enough to turn and glare at Revere.

"What on earth were you thinking!" he growled, "You could have killed us both!"

"You needed to stop!" Revere defended himself. "We need to go back and warn the others before it's too late, or they will be sitting ducks for the Regulars!"

Kanen'to:kon shut his eyes and took a deep breath. Great Spirit grant him patience...

"Revere," he said, his voice tight with barely controlled anger, "look at the sky. It is already getting light out. Even if you turned around right now you would not be able to warn everyone in time. The best we can do now is tell the others of what has happened and help with the defences."

"And whose fault is that?"

"For what?" Kanen'to:kon snarled. "Because if anything, I can blame you for insisting that we stop off at every single house to warn the inhabitants for keeping me from getting to Adams in time to save him!"

Revere pressed his lips together until they went white, fury painted across his features. He looked like he was about to say something when the faint sound of drumming floated to their ears.

Kanen'to:kon whipped his head around. Drumming? That could only mean one thing. Glancing up at the sky, it was still fairly dark, but rapidly paling as the sun began to rise. He hadn't thought that the British army could have gotten so far by this time!
Turning back to Revere, he put on his best 'intimidating Indian' look. "Do you hear that?" he asked, glaring with narrowed eyes. "Those are the drums of Pitcairn and his army. They are already on the move. All we can do now is get to the meeting point and -"

He cut himself off as a thought occurred to him. "Wait..." he said slowly, turning back towards where the sound of drumming was emanating. "If that is Pitcairn's men, he would surely be there, will he not?"

Revere shifted impatiently behind him, clearly not seeing his point. "Yes," he said, "everything I've heard about the man says that he leads from the front. Why?"

Kanen'to:kon slid off of the horses back and shoved the reins into Revere's hands, keeping his eyes locked in the direction of the drumming. "Here," he said roughly. "The horse is yours. But before you go off to warn your 'others', know that your family is waiting at the meeting point just beyond the bridge." Turning his head, he locked eyes with the colonist man. "And think on whether or not you wish to leave them without a father or husband."

Not waiting for an answer, Kanen'to:kon flipped his hood up and walked towards the trees. If Pitcairn was here, it was likely that Adams and Hancock were there as well. If he could even just locate them, let alone free them from the camp, he could nip the Templar's plan (whatever it was) in the bud.

In the forest, surrounded by nature, Kanen'to:kon could feel himself relax. Spotting a likely-looking tree, he scuttled his way up the trunk and into the canopy and began to follow the sound of the drums.

It didn't take long to come upon a column of soldiers. Spitting and swearing, their complaints echoed through the trees as he hopped from branch to branch.

"Damn it, wot kind of attack needs us marchin' through the fuckin' night?"

"My feet hurt."

"All this, just for a bunch of bumpkins that'll turn and run at the first sight of us - it's a waste, I tell you."

Kanen'to:kon rolled his eyes. He'd like to see these men on some of Heiman's three hour runs back at the Davenport Homestead! Pausing on a particularly thick branch, he crouched to think. Judging by the size of the column and the sounds of drumming from further away, this particular group was most likely just part of a flanking maneuver, meant to capture anyone in Concord that hadn't managed to run over the bridge by the time the main body of the army had arrived. Briefly, he wondered if he should turn back and warn the others; leave finding the men to someone else. But then something that one of the soldiers said caught his attention.

"- all this and Pitcairn can't even be arsed to be here! Turns back as soon as he gets that damn message from his pets. I tell you, if I wasn't flat broke, I'd be headin' to the hills as we speak!"

Looking down, Kanen'to:kon quickly spotted the speaker. It was a grenadier, gesturing wildly to his fellow soldier as he lagged behind, ignoring the dirty looks shot at him as he marched completely out of rhythm with everyone else. He began to carefully move his way through the branches, staying close enough to hear what the man was saying.

"God, we're just a tax collector to the bastard! Go do this, go do that, take the colonials' weapons away even though we already got their rebel leaders sittin' pretty back in Boston -"
Kanen'to:kon nearly fell out of the tree. What had the man just said?

Catching himself, he stood in the branches above in a daze. If what the man said was true, then this whole attack was just a distraction. With Adams and Hancock back in the city, they didn't need to take the weapons that were stored nearby - they had already won. Once the two men were dead, the Sons of Liberty would fall apart. Adams was the one that spoke to the crowds and stirred them up. It was Hancock that had such a high rank amongst the rest of the colonists, representing the state of Massachusetts in their Continental Congress. With their two most fervent leaders dead and named as traitors, Kanen'to:kon could see the entire rebellion falling apart.

Turning, he began to head back to the meeting point. This was more important than any assassination attempt on the commanders of the attack.

Connor was looking over the fanorona board when Adams first stirred. Glancing up, he narrowed his eyes and sat up a little straighter.

The man had not taken his capture well. While Hancock had gone down easily, being snuck up on as he was relieving himself, Adams had been unfortunately more alert. While he was no match for Connor, he had managed to blacken Clipper's eye and smash his own head against the back of his chair before Connor had choked him unconscious.

The middle-aged man blinked blearily from the cot that he was lying on, clearly dazed and confused as to where he was. Trying to sit up, he groaned and grabbed his head.

"You probably shouldn't be moving around, sir," said Clipper softly, nervously tapping the lip of his tea cup with a dirty nail. "You took a good whack back there."

And what a whack it had been, Connor mused to himself as he took a sip from his own cup. Beating the man unconscious had not been his aim when he had entered that house; he had been hoping to just sneak up and quickly choke him out before he could react. After all, head injuries were dangerous and they needed the two men alive for a trial before being hanged. But just as he had been creeping up behind the man as he stared into the fire, one of the floorboards had squeaked and the man had turned around and spotted him. And just like that, a quick and easy capture had turned into a scuffle that left both Connor and Clipper bruised and Adams bleeding from where he had hit his head.

Speaking of which, Adams was now staring at the dried blood flakes on his hand with what looked to be dawning horror. Putting his cup back down, Connor licked a drop from his lips and turned to reluctantly reassure the older man.

"Don't worry, Master Adams," he said, keeping his emotion from his voice, "it was not a serious injury. It has already been treated." Ignoring the look of dawning realization that he was not in good hands that was being shot towards him by Adams, Connor lifted the tea pot and held it out towards Clipper.

"Say, Clipper," he said, "would you mind getting some more tea? I think that Master Adams would like some."

Clipper glanced over at Adams, who was now fully sitting up and looking around in the beginnings of a panic, and wisely decided to leave. Once the door thudded shut, Connor finally turned away fully from the game board to face Adams.
To face the man that had tried to plunge the colonies into war.

"I would not advise any attempts to escape," Connor said.

Adams tensed, then relaxed. "Really," he said, his voice falsely light, "well, you can't blame me for at least considering it."

Connor tipped his head to one side slightly, unamused by Adams' attempt at levity. "Perhaps," he said, "though I certainly know that there are other things that I can blame you for."

"Really," Adams said, his gaze roaming around the room before landing on Hancock, who was still unconscious on the bed across from him. "My apologies; I was not aware that I had given you such grave offense as to cause myself to be attacked in my home."

Connor nearly rolled his eyes at that. "That was not your home, Master Adams," he said, "it was your hideout. Do not pretend that it was anything else. You fled the city and hid there to keep yourself from being brought to the justice that you ramble on about at your meetings and in your pamphlets."

Adams stiffened. His hands, which had migrated to his lap, suddenly clenched each other until the knuckles went white.

"Rambling," he said in what would have been a dangerous tone if he was speaking to anyone but Connor. "It is not rambling when I remind my fellow citizens of our natural rights. And being dragged from my home and hung for speaking so is not justice."

Keeping his cool, Connor picked his cup up again from the table and took another sip. "Oh?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "It is not justice to hang someone encouraging rebellion? A rebellion that will undoubtedly kill hundreds if not thousands if you get your way?"

Adams scoffed. "Thousands?" he said. "You exaggerate. And I do not wish for the death of my fellow man's sons - on the contrary, all I wish is their freedom to make their voice heard in the halls of Parliament back in Mother England!"

Very carefully, Connor put his cup back down. Breathing in deeply through his nose, he tried to calm himself down as anger at the man's arrogance surged through him.

Making their voices heard - saying that as if he was not at the forefront of those calling for their 'brothers' to pick up their arms and have their voices heard through violence! What did he think would happen when the farmers and the merchants of the land picked up rifles and tried to go against Major Pitcairn and the rest of the British Army? How did he think the Regulars would react to seeing that after the Boston Riots and their Tea Party and all the thousand and one little acts of violence against them? Did he think that one of the white men's angels would descend from on high and lead them to victory? No. What would happen would be the Boston Massacre all over again except bigger - so much bigger that the streets would run with blood and gore. Their precious young men would die, and die by the hundreds, wasting their lives at the behest of men that would never stir from their own chairs and comforts and walk beside them on the path that they had placed in front of the people.

"You have a funny way of showing those desires, Master Adams," Connor said, once he was sure that he could speak without raising his voice. "Those unfortunates that you tarred and feathered have a very different view of what you are trying to accomplish, here."

"I never condoned those attacks -"
"And yet you have never spoken out against them, either. And do not say that there was nothing you could do. You have been to more than a few of such protests and I have never heard of you calling for a more moderate approach to your goals."

Adams' lips thinned as Hancock began to stir in the opposite bed, blinking sleepily and reaching up to rub his throat.

"Tell me, Master Adams," Connor said, leaning forward, "have you ever seen someone die in front of you? Not from old age or sickness, but from violence?" His lips twitched at Adams' jerky shake of his head. "Because it is not glorious. It is not a great sacrifice that will be remembered. The violence that you are pushing for, that you will never even come close to actually taking part in, will just end with your 'fellow man's' son choking on his own blood in the dirt as he is stepped over by his opponents. You and your speeches only bring death Adams, and whatever pretty words that you dress it up in can not disguise that fact."

Before anything more could be said (and judging from how red Adams' face had gone, there were going to be more words), there was a sharp rap at the door before it was opened and Major Pitcairn, slightly dusty and sweaty-looking, walked in with a tea tray-bearing Clipper on his heels.

"Master Adams," Pitcairn said, looking tired, "Master Hancock, good afternoon. I do hope that young Master Connor has been taking good care of you."

"Good care," Adams scoffed, "if by good care you mean creeping up on us like a thief in the night before assaulting us and dragging us back to be killed by a tyrant's goons, then yes, he has taken very good care of us."

Connor rolled his eyes at Adams and had the feeling that Pitcairn was struggling not to do the same. The older Scottish man kept himself under control though. Merely sighing, he stood to the side in the doorway and let Clipper meekly shuffled in to place the tray down on the table. His job done, Clipper then quietly moved away to stand in the corner, his hands folded in front of him.

"For what it is worth," Pitcairn said, sounding as tired as he looked, "I am sorry about that. If I had thought that there was any chance of you two coming quietly upon arrest, I would have taken it. It is just unfortunate that Master Wilkenson and Connor were needed at all."

"I certainly feel unfortunate," Hancock rasped, sitting up more on his bed. Adams' angry gaze was dragged away from Pitcairn and Connor, quickly softening as he looked at his older partner-in-crime.

Pitcairn shrugged and pulled out the other chair by the table, sitting down. "Again, I am sorry. Would tea help?"

The two prisoners looked carefully at them. Adams with banked anger, and Hancock with cool calculation. After a few seconds had drawn out, Hancock finally nodded once.

Pitcairn turned and picked up the tea pot, carefully pouring the steaming drink into two of the cups and then handing them to the men one at a time. The two of them drank the hot beverage carefully, staring at them over the tops of the plain white cups. Adams in particular glared at Connor, looking as if he wished that he could set him on fire with his mind. Connor didn't dignify the man with the same amount of vitriol. Instead, he went back to his own cup, now cold, and took a sip.

"So, gentlemen," Pitcairn said once the tea was gone, "I am sure that you know what is going to happen now."
"A trial. Then our public hanging," said Hancock.

Pitcairn inclined his head. "Yes," he said. "I don't expect it to take long. Our superiors have been pushing for some time now for your deaths."

"So we will have our day in court, eh?" Adams asked, looking at the Major shrewdly. "And I don't suppose that we'll have a chance to defend ourselves."

"You'll have your own lawyers," Pitcairn said, "though you won't be allowed to speak for yourselves, I'm afraid. The general doesn't want either of you stirring up another riot."

Adams glared.

"So we are to place our trust in some random lawyer assigned to us by the very people who want us dead?" he said, sounding awfully offended for someone who had to have known the sort of trouble that he was courting with his actions. Connor wondered what he had expected; another soapbox to stand on and trumpet his bloody beliefs? Even after all these years, the sheer arrogance of colonists had him shaking his head in amazement at their hubris.

"Master Adams, Master Hancock, what were you expecting?" Pitcairn said, spreading his hands in frustration and echoing Connor's thoughts. "The crown wants these colonies calmed, and you are the most readily identifiable rabble-rousers around. Someone has to be made an example of. You should just be thankful that the king's wrath is not extending to your families as well."

Adams turned an ugly shade of red just as Hancock went white.

"So this is it," Adams said, biting off each word, "I am murdered, the revolution falls, and the colonies go back to being taxed and lorded over without the say that they deserve as English citizens. And I should just be happy that your wrath is not extending to harming my wife and children."

Pitcairn shook his head, looking sincerely distressed. "Not my wrath," he said, emphasizing the 'my', "the king's wrath. Look, Master Adams, Master Hancock. I know both of you. I like both of you; you are fine men who truly believe in what you are doing. I have met your wives and children, I have broken bread with you and celebrated your achievements. But I am a soldier in His Majesty's Army and it is my duty to carry out his commands, no matter what I think of them." He stretched out his arms towards them beseechingly. "I don't want to do this but you have forced my hand. The most I can do for you at this point is make sure that your families don't suffer for your actions."

Pitcairn's emotional plea was met with cold silence. Glaring at him, neither Adams nor Hancock looked moved by his apologies.

Connor ground his teeth together at their lack of appreciation. Did they truly have no idea the amount of pain that this was causing Pitcairn? How he cared for the colonies as his home, how he loved its people and its spirit? But no, they didn't. He could tell from how they sneered as Pitcairn's hands fell back to his lap.

"I see that I can not get through to you now," he said, shaking his head. "I truly regret that."

Standing up, he collected himself, repressing his emotions until only the soldier remained. "Well," he said, "I have made my case to you and offered what help that I can. I leave you now to make your peace with God; this will most likely be the last time we speak."

Turning, he gestured for Connor and Clipper to follow him as he left. Quickly, Connor piled the
dirtied cups onto the tray and picked it up, ignoring the venomous stares that followed him.

The sound of the door being locked behind him sounded as final as the last nail being hammered into a coffin.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, I really have no good excuse for missing the last update. Honestly, I just forgot. In any case, I hope you guys are satisfied with this chapter. Let me know what you think in the comments!
Whoops and hollers of victory greeted Kanen'to:kon as he reached the meeting place. Jumping down from the tree, he took a moment to drink in the sights.

The army that had marched on Concord and Lexington was in a full and ignomious retreat. The neat lines that Kanen'to:kon had found earlier had dissolved completely, with men dropping their muskets as they fled, their bright red coats flapping behind them. Some had found horses, and were struggling to control them so that they could run even faster; as he watched, one soldier lost the battle entirely and was bucked off, landing right in a large puddle of mud.

That was not to say that the rebels got away unscathed, though. Even as the men cheered and hugged each other, the bodies of their comrades lay where they had fallen, round red holes showing the causes of their death. Kanen'to:kon grimaced and mentally said a quick prayer for their spirits.

"Ganendoego!"

A cry from a familiar voice jerked Kanen'to:kon out of his dark thoughts. Looking up, he saw a very familiar face that he hadn't seen in nearly two years running towards him. Will.

One of the other novices that he and Aveline had trained with, Will had been one of the rarer type of colonists that Kanen'to:kon had met, caring for those who were different from them even while hiding it under a gruff exterior. It had been him that had gotten Joe to back off when his exuberance became too much for Kanen'to:kon's quieter sensibilities, and in return he was always Kanen'to:kon's second choice for partner during training exercises when Aveline was not available.

The wiry, sandy-haired man was not his usual gruff self right now, though. His eyes were sparkling underneath his broad-brimmed hat, and his scruffy attempt at a beard didn't cover up his broad grin. Laughing, he reached out and clapped Kanen'to:kon on the shoulder once he reached him.

"Did you see that, Ganendoego? We sent those bastards running with their tails between their legs!"

Flashing a brief smile, Kanen'to:kon reached up and gently took Will's hand off of his shoulder before answering.

"Yes, I did. But that is not why I am here. Did Revere make it back here?"

The smile faded from Will's face at Kanen'to:kon's question. "No," he said, his eyebrow's knitting together. "Aveline said that he was with you."

Looking over Will's shoulder, Kanen'to:kon spotted Aveline standing near the edge of the celebration with a woman and several children that he could only assume was Mrs. Revere. He pressed his lips together tightly. Revere had a good sense of direction; he had been the one to direct them to the different houses of the people that were warned. So it was highly unlikely that he had simply gotten lost getting to the rendezvous point.

Kanen'to:kon's stomach began to sink. Looking back at the still-fleeing soldiers, it began to occur to him that it would not be hard for a few desperate men to set upon someone for their horse.

"Ganendoego," Will said, dragging his attention back to the present, "what happened with Revere?"
"Revere?" a sharp voice pierced through the sounds of celebration. "What happened to Revere that you're muttering about?"

Turning his head, Kanen'to:kon saw a grey-haired colonist man in a long red coat staring at them, his pale eyes narrowed in suspicion. All around them, conversations began to taper off as more and more turned towards the shout of the man. The celebratory mood that had suffused the air began to thin.

Kanen'to:kon clenched his fists at his sides, itching to unsheathe his blades in a nervous tick. Looking at the grey-haired man, he was suddenly seized with a powerful dislike for him. What he was saying was for the Assassin's ears only, and maybe those of the Sons of Liberty. Who was this man to suddenly butt in so loudly and insistently? He narrowed his eyes at the man, who narrowed them right back.

Will, sensing the rapidly souring mood, cleared his throat. "Master Barrett," he said, his voice harsh in the sudden silence, "this is Ganendoego, an ally of the Sons of Liberty. The last I heard, he was helping Master Revere warn everyone of Pitcairn's attack."

"Really?" the newly named Barrett said skeptically. "Then where is Master Revere, then?"

"Well," Will stumbled, "I was just asking that -"

"I do not know," Kanen'to:kon interrupted, keeping his eyes locked with Barrett's. "I gave him the horse when we happened upon the attack so that he could make his way to this point. I planned to go and try to take out Major Pitcairn while he was distracted with leading the attack on your towns."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Because I do not know what happened to him after that. I came back to tell our allies that Pitcairn was not actually here in the first place."

Barrett started at that.

"What?" he whispered. "Then what was he doing?"

"From what I overheard, staying back in Boston to make sure that Adams and Hancock were unable to escape."

Barrett's face drained of what little colour it had.

"What?" Aveline pushed her way through the crowd that had formed around Kanen'to:kon and Garret, her lips thinning and face pale. "What did you say about Hancock and Adams?"

Kanen'to:kon frowned. "Revere did not make it back even to tell you?" he asked, anxiety forming a knot in his stomach. "I told him that we needed to warn the others -"

"Hancock and Adams have been taken?" Barrett said, his eyes round. "Back to Boston, in the custody of Pitcairn?"

"Yes," Kanen'to:kon replied, distracted. "Revere and I found the house where they were staying empty. There were signs of a struggle."

A ripple of muttering radiated through the crowd. People were looking at each other, worried stamped clear on their faces. Even Aveline, who was usually a rock of confidence, was pressing her
lips together until they were near-bloodless.

"You need to do something."

Looking back at Barrett, Kanen'to:kon frowned.

"Do what?" he asked, holding out his hands. "What can I do here and now to fix this?"

"Not just you," Barrett hissed, leaning in, "that entire group that you people are a part of! The ones that promised to help us in our fight against the empire!"

Kanen'to:kon stiffened, along with Will and Aveline. Automatically, he began to scan the crowd that was still surrounding them. They were still muttering to each other, reeling over the loss of their leaders. Most looked worried, but several looked just about ready to bolt. Those ones were shifting from one foot to the other, looking around like they were trying to find an escape route.

"Master Barrett," Aveline said, her voice steely, "I must ask you to first of all not speak so loud when talking about our alliance. Secondly, I assure you that this will not go unchallenged."

Leaning forward, she lowered her voice to an intimate whisper, designed to keep from carrying very far. "I assure you, we are equally as worried about this as you are. But we must go back to discuss what we are going to do with our leaders before we take action; else we could end up just making things worse." Reaching out, she clapped a hand onto his shoulder. "Do not worry; we will not allow either of the men to die at the hands of our mutual enemy."

Barrett didn't look entirely convinced. However, he did lean back slightly and step to the side. "Alright then," he said gruffly, "but I and the others will hold you to your words here. If Sam and John aren't safe before the trial, I can't promise that things won't sour between our groups."

Aveline raised an eyebrow. "Duly noted," she said. Turning back to Kanen'to:kon and Will, she jerked her head to the side. "Come on now, then," she said, a strain of black humour running through her voice. "You heard the man."

As they strode away, Will asked the question that was troubling Kanen'to:kon.

"What are we going to tell Mistress Scott?"

Aveline shrugged overly casually.

"The truth."

"Balls."

Kanen'to:kon pressed his lips together as he stood in front of Mistress Scott's desk with Will and Aveline. As she dragged her fingers through her hair, messing up its careful curls, he shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"I am sorry," he said softly. "If I had known that the attack was just to distract us from the real kidnapping attempt, I would not have dragged my feet as much with Revere."

"No, no," Mistress Scott said, waving her hand and sitting back up, "it wasn't your fault. We should have realized what the Templars were planning. Lord knows Kenway isn't the type to treat the symptoms when he feels that he can cut out the source of the disease at its heart." Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply through her nose and let it out.
Opening her eyes, Kanen'to:kon saw her usual steel back in place. "What's done is done. All we can do now is try to remove Adams and Hancock from wherever they're being held. Saint-Prix, do you have anything on that front?"

The Frenchman shifted from where he had been standing in the corner of the room, tapping a long, rolled up tube of paper against the tips of one hand's fingers. "Non, nothing solid," he said quietly, stroking his beard. "All is quiet amongst the soldiers in the city. I do have someone following Pitcairn, though, and from that I think that I have a good guess."

Stepping forward, he placed the paper down on the desk and unrolled it, revealing it to be the blueprints of -

"Southgate Fort." Mistress Scott's voice was grim. "You truly believe this is the most likely location?"

"Yes," said Saint-Prix. "It is the most secure location in the city for the Regulars, and on top of that -" he said, his eyes flicking up towards Kanen'to:kon, "Paul Revere was spotted being brought into the fort in chains."

Kanen'to:kon crossed his arms and toyed with the end of one braid nervously. "He was caught, then?" he asked.

"That appears to be the case, oui," Saint-Prix said.

Kanen'to:kon squeezed his eyes shut and sighed, rubbing them with his thumb and forefinger. "I left him with a horse and close to safety."

Aveline shifted beside him and put her hand on his arm. "No one is blaming you," she said. "Revere knew the risks when he insisted on riding out to warn the others. Besides, he is not as in danger as the others are, I think. There is no price on his head, the last time I checked."

Kanen'to:kon bit the inside of his cheek and bowed his head. For all their words, he still blamed himself. Revere, for all of his groping and loudness, was still a kind man, and one with a wife and children as well. His gut churned at the thought of them and their devastated faces as he and the other Assassins had left. They would be taken care of by the other members of the Sons of Liberty, he knew; after all, Revere was a popular man amongst his peers. But the Kanien'keh:ka man in him shrivelled at the thought of leaving an ally's family behind at the mercy of others.

"If that is truly the case," Mistress Scott said, ignoring the three of them entirely. "then we have a tough assignment ahead of us. Southgate is not an easy fort to get into, and it will probably be even harder than usual now that Pitcairn has Adams and Hancock in there. No doubt the guards there have been doubled, and that's not even getting into the amount of soldiers in the street."

"That's tough, yes," Will offered, peering closely at the map, "but I'm rather more worried about getting back out with the prisoners. We can climb and fight and hide but I'm not sure if Adams and his friend will be able to keep up."

Mistress Scott looked up from the map and frowned.

"Damn," she said, "you're right. Even if we can get in, it's unlikely that we'd be able to get them out without alerting anyone." Leaning back in her seat, she tapped one neat nail against the map. "Even if we killed the guards, with how high-strung the city has been, it's too likely that the bodies will be discovered. Even the slightest thing out of place could end the whole mission."

Silence fell over the room. Placing his hand over Aveline's, Kanen'to:kon squeezed it slightly. He
did not like this. On one hand, Kanen'to:kon had sever doubts that the alliance between them and the Sons of Liberty could last without Adams pushing for them to cooperate. Even early into their alliance, Kanen'to:kon had heard grumbling about how their leader was unwilling to show their face, and how they demanded full control over martial operations. Adams had been the one to put the most work into soothing such feelings, and Kanen'to:kon did not think it was likely that another would arise with quite the same pull amongst the rebels.

On the other, Mistress Scott's pessimistic assessment of the situation at Southgate Fort was not inaccurate. Kanen'to:kon had seen the soldiers passing by as they returned to the city and took up positions throughout, never more than a few meters from another set of men ready to come to their aid in case the rebels decided to push their advantage. And if what he had heard earlier from Joe was true, their were more soldiers due to appear any day now, sent from England to back up the rest of the army.

But could they truly afford to just leave the men captured? Could they afford to leave their alliance with the rebels? Looking at the faces of the other people in the room, Kanen'to:kon could see similar thoughts flitting across their faces.

Looking back down, he studied the map of the fort. It was the usual type of fort that the colonialists preferred, with thick walls and only one gate in or out. Recently, new fortifications had been ordered under Pitcairn, supposedly to enlarge the fort even further and making it even harder to sneak in -

Wait.

A thought occured to Kanen'to:kon then, looking down at the map, the plans for the new walls made in ink that was darker than the ink that drew the main map. Construction was a messy business, filled with people coming in and out at odd times. Even if the old part of the fort was locked up tight, there would be plenty of people that would not be questioned if they drew close to the walls, or even went in. People with darker skin, especially.

His eyes slide over to Aveline.

Clearing his throat, he steeled himself as eyes slid over to him. "Perhaps we are thinking about this the wrong way," he said softly, unable to get his voice to go any louder.

"Oh?" said Mistress Scott, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Kanen'to:kon replied. Shifting, he gently disentangled his arm from Aveline's and pointed down at the map. "We may not need to sneak in at all. Pitcairn has hired many to increase the fortifications in preparation for a new batch of soldiers to arrive," he explained, "and so there are many people going in and out around the fort. Even entering the fort. If we somehow disguise ourselves, it might be possible to simply walk in as some sort of servant and hide."

"Yes," Saint-Prix said, "but that does not address the problem of getting out again."

Kanen'to:kon raised a hand to stop the other man in his tracks. "I am getting to that. Say that someone like Aveline goes into the fort as the slave of some, say, mason; she could easily sneak in and steal some uniforms from the laundry and hide them while finding out exactly where Hancock and Adams are. Then, one night a few more of us could sneak in -"

"And dress Adams and Hancock as soldiers and just march your way out of the fort," Will finished. His eyes were alight with interest. "That certainly sounds doable."
Mistress Scott looked thoughtful. The words that came out of her mouth were not hopeful, though.

"And what if you are found out?" she asked. "What is to stop the other soldiers from realizing that there are imposters in their midst?"

Kanen'to:kon wilted slightly. He had not thought that far. Aveline, however, did not let him falter for long.

"They wouldn't notice if there was something else happening in the city," she said. The same light that had entered Will's eyes now burned in her's, unfaltering in its confidence. "Let the Sons of Liberty carry their weight in retrieving their leaders. If they start another protest and get it large enough, Pitcairn would be forced to send out soldiers to disperse the crowds."

"And if the soldiers refuse to go?"

"Even an argument will draw attention away from the prisoners."

"And what if Pitcairn is not a fool?" snapped Saint-Prix. "What if he realizes that this is just a distraction from the real aims of our group?"

"No," said Mistress Scott, laying a hand on his arm, "he wouldn't dare." A slow smile was spreading across her face. "With how things are in the city and the recent victory of the rebels at Lexington and Concord, the army needs to look capable of keeping control of the people. If he doesn't come out -"

"Then the rebels will just get bolder, undercutting the whole reason why they're even giving Adams and Hancock a trial at all." Will was grinning now. "I like this plan. Get a few people to smash up a few houses, force the army to leave, all while we sneak in the back and make off with the real prize."

"And once they're out, we can just keep them in a safehouse," Mistress Scott added, looking like a satisfied cat. "Wait until things calm down enough to move them back out of the city." She suddenly grinned fiercely, giving hint to the sort of Assassin she had been in her prime. "I like it. But who to take?"

Kanen'to:kon swallowed and stepped forward again. "If I can make a suggestion," he said, "Aveline could probably enter the fort easiest out of everyone in the room. Will and Joe could equally as easily disguise themselves as Regulars."

"And you?"

Kanen'to:kon hesitated. "I suppose that I could be coordinating things with the Sons of Liberty," he suggested, well aware that he had not left any real role for himself.

But then Saint-Prix was shaking his head, dragging attention away from Kanen'to:kon. "No, no," he said, "this is too risky. If anything goes wrong; if Pitcairn decides that they can take another hit to their reputation, we have three Assassins stuck in the middle of enemy territory."

Mistress Scott spoke before anyone else could. "Well then, Saint-Prix," she said, "if you are so concerned for our people, then Kanen'to:kon can be backup." She turned her head to look at Kanen'to:kon with glittering eyes. "You would probably do more good hiding in the bushes and taking out anyone suspicious than in an angry mob, anyways."

"I-I suppose," Kanen'to:kon stammered. "If someone else can take my place with coordinating the Brotherhood with the Sons of Liberty."
Mistress Scott rubbed her chin and smirked. "Oh, I think I know of a person," she said cheerfully. "That Frenchman of yours; Stephane, was it? He's been listening rather closely to a few of our men whenever they visit his work for a drink. I think he'd be quite eager to help us."
Connor was downing his fifth cup of tea when there was a knock at the door.

Glancing up from his book (Robinson Crusoe, a gift from his father), he very deliberately put the cup down and placed a hand over the hilt of one of the three throwing knives lying on the table. "Come in," he called, carefully curling his fingers around the hilt of the knife.

"Mister Connor," came a very familiar voice.

"Fillian?"

The young boy that Connor had met that cool autumn night had completely disappeared. Instead, standing in the doorway was a neatly-dressed young man who would not have looked out of place serving in any fine estate that dotted the countryside. With blond hair pulled back into a tail that was wrapped in a black ribbon and a neat yellow waistcoat over a crisp-looking white shirt and a sober set of a black coat and trousers, the younger boy, or rather young man, tucked his tricorn hat underneath his arm and straightened proudly, beaming at Connor.

"Yeah, it's me," he said, "in the flesh. Gillian's been insisting that I tidy myself up lately; I decided to take the hint before coming on over." Taking a few further steps in, he paused and looked around the room, his brow crinkling. "Oi, where's Clipper? I wanted to ask him a few things. I've been thinking of buying a new pistol lately."

Connor grinned back at him, unaccountably pleased by the sight of his friend. "Clipper's asleep," he replied. "He'll be helping coordinate rooftop sweeps for the trial and he wanted to be well-rested before meeting the men tomorrow."

Fillian looked out of the corner of his eye at him, his lips twitching into a smirk. "And you aren't asleep as well because..."

Connor flushed slightly. "Ah, I suppose I am simply nervous over the lack of reaction from our enemies over this. I cannot help but shake the feeling that something is going to happen soon, and I do not want to be caught napping."

"Well, it's not going to help if you're completely sleep-deprived either," Fillian pointed out. But his smile took the sting out of his words. "I suppose it works out for me anyways; I was worried that I'd be rousing you when I finally managed to get over here - it's mad in the streets, what with all the checkpoints."

Connor smiled. "I can imagine," he said. If he hadn't had that letter from Pitcairn on the way here, it probably would have taken him most of the day to get to Southgate. As it was, he could imagine the sorts of troubles that even someone with the skin-colour that Fillian had could get into. "But I am being rude. Please, sit."

Fillian took to the gestured seat across the table with a thankful groan. "Thanks," he said, "I ended up taking way too much time going around all the checkpoints by cutting over the roofs. Did you know that the tunnels are full of men?" He nodded in satisfaction at the way Connor's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah. Apparently someone gave them a hint. Been making a lot of people mighty tetchy. But that's not what I'm here for."

Placing his hat on the table, he folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Gillian's got good news about the business."
"Oh?" said Connor, distracted and trying to remember where the other teacups in the fort were stored. He supposed that if push came to shove, he could give his own to Fillian, but -

His brow crinkled as he processed what Fillian had said. "Good news?"

Fillian was grinning at him again. "Yeah," he said. "Good news. The last three shipments of bear skins got through to the Virgin Islands and according to those in the know down there, that rat bastard of an Assassin merchant that kept robbing you was finally taken out. Congratulations, you and Gillian are officially rolling in the pounds now."

Connor couldn't help it. A burst of happy laughter forced itself out of his lips.

Finally! Finally he would be able to send more aid to his people. Finally he could send guns and medicine and other materials to help them in their fight against the colonists and the town-burners. He had not felt so light in ages, and he had Gillian and Fillian to thank for it. For standing by him for these past few years and working as his employees on the colonial side of things.

"That is wonderful news!" he said, enthused. "What does Gillian need to see me for, then?"

Fillian shrugged and waved his hand. "Oh, just a bunch of little things," he said, "you know, looking over the books, making sure everyone was paid, arranging the next shipments, etcetera. Things that just go a lot smoother when you're around."

"You and Gillian are perfectly fine with handling things on your own," Connor said.

"Yeah, but you're like a good luck charm," Fillian replied. "I swear, you could rub two shillings together and come back with a pound. Money just multiplies around you."

Connor was about to reply to Fillian's wild claims when there was another knock at the door. Tensing again as his good humour fled, he placed a hand back on one of his knives before calling out.

"Come in!"

The door swung open noiselessly to reveal a redcoat standing there with his hat underneath his arm.

"Major Pitcairn?"

The major smiled tiredly as Connor relaxed, letting go of the knife. "I see you're still up," he said in his soft Scottish burr, his eyes flicking over the half-native and his friend. "Might I ask why you aren't getting the good night's sleep that you deserve?"

Connor flushed slightly. Clearly realizing that the Major had to be there for a reason, Fillian quietly stood up from the table and placed his hat on his head.

"Sorry, sir," he said, quickly bobbing a bow at the both of them, "I didn't mean to keep Connor up. I'll just be leaving now then."

Pitcairn graciously nodded and moved aside in the doorway to allow Fillian to slip out. Connor ducked his head and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, rubbing them furiously. At the mention of sleep from the Major, Connor had felt his body's needs tug down on his eyelids.

"My apologies, sir," he said, blinking away the dark spots in his vision, "I am just worried that Adams and Hancock might be freed. There has not been any real attempts to do so so far, and -"
"And you're waiting for the other boot to drop," Pitcairn chuckled. "I see. A reasonable worry. But not one that you have to worry about."

"Major?"

The older man cocked his head, seemingly studying Connor as he sat there. Connor wasn't sure what he was expecting to see. As it was, all that was there was a young, dark-haired man with skin dark enough to still be written off as a tan wearing a slightly rumpled blue waistcoat and black trousers with boots. Hardly the most impressive figure, Connor knew, but the various weapons that were still at close hand made him feel a little better.

"Walk with me," the major said.

Outside of the building, the air was still cool, winter not quite willing to completely give way to spring just yet. Nodding as the guards by the door saluted, Pitcairn strolled past them, heading towards the main walls of the fort.

"I hope you do not mind if we take the long way to your quarters," he said, answering Connor's unspoken question. "I want to make sure that the men are still alright; tensions are rising in the city."

Connor nodded silently, tugging his jacket so that it was better settled across his shoulders. He knew all about the city; living in it for only a week and a half, he was nonetheless perfectly aware of just how strained things were between Boston and Pitcairn's soldiers. Even after entering it so short a time ago, Connor had overheard from the soldiers stories of three assaults on Regulars, several instances of effigies being hung from trees, rotting trash being flung at them and food being purposefully incorrectly prepared so as to harm them. The last one Connor was not quite sure was done on purpose, but it certainly illustrated the fear and anger that the soldiers felt towards the people; not the greatest thing, he knew, but certainly logical after the riots and the occupation. Pitcairn more than had his hands full keeping both sides from each other's throat, and it was with a certain amount of pride that Connor noted that he was probably one of the few people capable of such a feat. Not many could pull off being liked by their enemies and their allies after all.

"Tell me," Pitcairn said as they crested the wall, pulling Connor out of his musing, "you're worried about the Assassins attacking and trying to free Adams and Hancock. What do you think are the actual chances of such a thing?"

Connor hummed to himself and looked over the crenellations. Spread out across the fields, with cooking fires and hastily-erected shacks and tents, was the vast majority of the British army that was sent to the colonies. Cramped into squalor and unwilling to move outside the walls due to fearing being attacked by the so-called 'Patriots', tempers had been flaring non-stop, leading to fights and in a few cases, deaths. Connor was simply lucky, he knew, to have managed to have avoided arousing anyone's ire with his darker skin, but he tried to stay out of sight anyways.

"I think," he said slowly, "that an attack is inevitable. I think that they have only held off so far in the hopes that things will get more chaotic in the fort as time goes on without any action. I am not sure whether or not such an attempt to free the Sons of Liberty will succeed, but I do think that it will happen, and soon."

Pitcairn nodded, looking unsurprised. "Would it surprise you to know that I agree with you?" he asked, his voice dry.

Connor pressed his lips together and shook his head.
"No," he said humbly. "I think that anyone would be able to predict such a thing if they knew what was going on under the surface of the situation."

Pitcairn nodded again.

"You know, Connor," he said, "you really have been an enormous help this past week."

Connor tilted his head to one side in confusion at the sudden change in topic. "I'm sorry?"

Pitcairn absentmindedly reached up and began to fiddle with his Templar ring. "I've been thinking lately," he said. "Rather carefully. You've been guarding the rebels day and night, freeing up my soldiers to patrol the city in bigger groups so that they're more protected. You even captured them, bringing them here with no fuss where others have failed repeatedly."

"I had the help of Clipper, there; without him knowing where they were, it would have been far more difficult."

The older man held up a hand, stopping him. "You've been going above and beyond what's been asked of you, and not just with this assignment if what I've heard through the Order is right." He squinted at Connor in the darkness, looking tired. "You've been working very hard for quite a while," he murmured, "for far less than you should."

"Sir?"

"Connor," Pitcairn said, "I've been considering this for a while; so have several others in the Inner Circle. Your actions during the past week have just solidified it. When the trial has ended, I'm going to suggest making you a full Templar Knight to your father."

Connor stilled, feeling as if he had just been cracked on the head with the butt of a musket. Silently gaping at the older man, his thoughts churned.

A Templar Knight? After only a little over a year of direct missions for the Order? He had never heard of such a thing!

"I-I," he stuttered, "are you sure? I have only been directly working for the Order for a year."

"And you've managed in that time to have how many tribes officially ally themselves with us?"

"Three, but -"

"And how many new native members have entered our ranks?"

"I am not sure, father did not mention that."

"And even before that, you managed to save the life of Master Johnson and kill three Assassins."

"Clipper was the one that killed two of them, all I managed to do was get injured and -"

"Connor."

He very nearly flinched when Pitcairn clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it.

"Connor," Pitcairn said sternly. "Protest it all you like. But believe me, everyone in the Order knows of what you've done and how hard you've worked for them already. If you're afraid that people will take your promotion badly, don't be; not even Charles would dare speak out against it, and we both know how ornery he can be."
Connor's lips twitched slightly at the joke. "Ounewaterika," he murmured. Boiling Water. Yes, he certainly knew how unpredictable the other man's temper could be. Lee had visited his father too often for Connor to be anything but certain of it. While the man rarely showed his temper towards him directly, Connor had more than once seen him reduce a stablehand or a barmaid to tears in a rage over their perceived inadequacies.

"Still -" he attempted.

"No." Pitcairn held up a finger. "I am going to have you made a Templar Knight, and that's final, do you hear me?" Despite his stern words, his eyes were twinkling. "Now go get some sleep before you collapse, you hear me? It won't do anyone any good if you fall asleep and let those Assassins in, hm?"

Connor bit the inside of his lip and smiled back sheepishly. "No, it would not," he agreed.

Connor had not expected to be able to fall asleep so quickly. With his worries about the Assassins attacking and the news that Pitcairn would sponsor his entrance into the Order proper, he had honestly expected to end up staring at the ceiling of his room for a few hours as he tried to relax. But the state that he was jerked out of at the sound of a large thump that echoed through his bare room could only be termed a 'sound sleep'.

Yawning and rubbing his eyes, he looked up from his cot towards the dark sloped ceiling. Blinking away the colours on the inside of his eyelids, Connor focused and pushed/felt.

Red. Hot and gross and frighteningly close by, like a hot coal held near his face. Connor was out of his bed and half-armed by the time his brain caught up with his actions. Carefully placing his pistol back down on the table where he had placed it to be close at hand, he sighed and rubbed his face.

All soldiers showed up as red, he scolded himself. He knew that, had known that for years. Inside of a fort, of course there would always be a few soldiers nearby!

But his gut was clenching regardless. And Connor had always been taught to trust his gut feelings; they had more than once saved his life out on the frontier when he acknowledged them and he was not about to start disregarding them now.

But when he did he would be properly dressed, not running around half-naked like a madman in his nightshirt and waving a pistol. So he carefully but quickly began to dress. His usual blue waistcoat went over his shirt, then his black coat. He did not bother with his hat, though. All the while, his stomach continued to twist itself into knots, demanding that he go faster faster faster. Connor did his best to ignore this, instead concentrating on making sure that he had all of his throwing knives properly tucked away. To hurry meant to forget something; his father had taught him that.

Outside, it was still black. The chill in the air attacked him relentlessly, chewing on his exposed skin until it reached his bones. Shivering, Connor hunched his shoulders and turned up the collar of his jacket. Rubbing his hands, he quickly pushed/felt again.

Red all over. What a surprise. Connor sucked on his lower lip.

What oh what was bothering him? What had forced him awake? Scanning what he could see from the front door of the officers' quarters, he could not see anything that would cause alarm. The lanterns were there and lit, flickering steadily and banishing the dark. There were no convenient carts of hay or corn husks for an Assassin to hide in near the walls, as per his suggestions to the Major. All of the walls and doors were properly guarded, with the soldiers looking appropriately
awake and aware of their surroundings. Which personally, Connor considered a miracle considering the usual level of competence that the Regulars portrayed.

Connor rubbed his hands together to warm them and began to walk away from his quarters. If nothing was bothering him here, then it probably was somewhere else in the fort. So to start with, he would check on the prisoners.

The different buildings of the fort loomed over him in the darkness. The lanterns, posted every few feet, did little to chase away the shadows that blended with the night sky. Normally, Connor would have taken advantage of those shadows while moving around the fort, unwilling to deal with the dirty looks and such from the soldiers. But tonight, it seemed that no one had the energy or inclination to metaphorically spit on him. All of the guards were far more focused on snuggling into their coats and scarves as much as possible while still looking like they were standing to attention than on making sure that Connor knew what they thought of half-breeds.

Well, what was the saying? Don't look at a gift-horse in the mouth? In any case, he wouldn't complain. Nodding genially at the shivering soldiers posted at the doors to the prison, Connor slipped into the building with barely a sound.

Inside, it was warm. A fire roared in the fireplace, lighting the room with flickering beams of warmth. In front of it, a guard slumped in a stiff-backed chair that had undoubtedly been stolen from some random home, judging by its ornate curlicues that caught the light. Sighing, Connor rubbed his ears to bring some warmth back into them.

"It is rather cold out," he said softly, trying gently to awaken the man.

The man didn't stir.

Connor frowned, frustration bubbling in his chest. All of the other soldiers managed to stay awake despite the cold, and this one man could not? Granted, yes, it was far more comfortable in here, but that chair could not possibly be comfortable enough to have a good nap in it.

His ears sufficiently warm, Connor let his hands drop to his sides. Walking over to the man, he reached out and touched his shoulder, gently shaking him. The man's head lolled grotesquely. Something thick and red began to slide out from between his lips, dribbling its way down his front.

Connor's hindbrain immediately identified it. But his forebrain, thinking and stuttering at the sight, had him reaching out to touch it.

It was slick, and wet, and still warm. And even in the dim lighting of the room, it was clear that it was a deep, bloody red.
Chapter 35

Connor stared at the blood smeared across his fingers blankly as his mind sputtered, denying what his eyes were telling him. Blood, here? In the middle of Southgate Fort, with an entire army huddling behind its walls?

But his father had taught him well, and he was soon shaking off the panic that had sliced to his core. To panic is to lose, that was what he had been told when growing up, and he had held those words close to his chest for years.

Leaning closer and squinting in the flickering light, Connor wished that it was a little brighter in the room. Tugging, he loosened the dead man's cravat and pulled it down to get a better look at the injury that had caused the man's death. He had to make sure that it was the Assassins, and not, say, someone with a grudge over a gambling debt, before raising the alarm. Pressing his fingers against the man's neck, he prodded at the warm, wet skin until he felt it. A small slit; barely noticeable even in the best light.

Connor let out a shaky sigh. Swallowing, he was forced to admit it to himself. Assassins were here.

Above, there was a small creak. The sound was so small that it could easily be written off as the building merely settling. But with that small slit in the back of the man's neck underneath his fingers, Connor knew that it was not.

For a moment, he was paralyzed with indecision. Unbidden, the memories of his last battles with the Assassins rose to the forefront of his mind. The first time, where he had barely understood the world around him after being forced to eat poison, hallucinating that he was an eagle and nearly dying if his Uncle Thomas' words were to be believed. And the other time. He had not been drugged that time. The massive pale scar along his gut spasmed as he remembered the tree branches that had been above him, untouched by the blood that had filled his mouth.

Connor swallowed. Closed his eyes. Stilled his trembling hands.

The Assassins were here, yes. They were terrifying fighters, yes. But he was not a child anymore, fighting against adults with only a few years of training versus their decades. He was experienced, strong; he had been in scrapes before out in the frontier, and his training had carried him through. He would not panic. Panicking would mean that he had already lost.

He opened his eyes again and wiped the now-sticky and half-dried blood off of his hands onto his trousers. His first flutters of fear had been banished, and now there was only him.

The Assassins were already inside of the building. Most likely they were already removing Adams and Hancock from their cell and planning their escape. It would not be easy for them. Entering the fort was not hard for a fully trained Assassin, Connor knew; there simply was no way to properly train the soldiers posted on how to spot an one and stop them without bringing the Order to light. A drawback of their secrecy, his father had always drawled. It was getting the men out that would stymie them; both were middle-aged, and nowhere near the sort of physical fitness that was required for the stunts that the Assassins were capable of. They would need some other way to escape.

So did he go and raise the alarm, causing mass confusion and possibly allowing them to slip away in the darkness? Or did he run up to confront them, fight who knew how many Assassins to keep Adams and Hancock where they were?
It was no choice. Quickly and quietly he strode to the door and opened it, peeking his head outside.

"Hush," he said, injecting his tone with urgency as one of the guards opened his mouth to ask what was wrong. "There are intruders in the fort. I need you two to go and raise the alarm. Rouse Major Pitcairn, and tell him that Connor was the one to discover them; he will know what to do."

The other guard, a brutish-looking man, looked like he was about to protest. Connor tilted his head and glared; they did not have the time for an argument. "I will stay and try to keep them from escaping. Now go!"

The glare and the growl in his voice broke the first guard's nerve. Grabbing his partner's sleeve, he took off down the muddy road like a shot. Satisfied, Connor closed the door. Hopefully the Assassins would not notice the sounds of the guards leaving. Tilting his head, he listened carefully.

Another soft creak. Connor licked his lips and began to creep his own way towards the stairs, carefully avoiding all of the creaks that he had been able to map in his week spent in the building. It was slow going. A week was not long enough to completely memorize all the little habits of a building.

It was, however, enough to memorize most of the larger ones. So Connor, although it was slow going, was able to make his way to the stairs and up them, towards the locked room that served as a cell, without arousing any obvious alarm.

Closer to the room, it became more obvious that something was wrong. A guard, leaning slumped at his post, a stream of black blood dribbling down his chin and his eyes glassed over. A rug, just slightly rucked up as if from a struggle. Connor grit his teeth. He would not let them go. He would not let them get past him.

Pausing at the door, he heard whispers. Hurried and hissed, nothing like the wild and so easily overheard plans of escape that Adams and Hancock had made while Connor was guarding them. These whispers were truly difficult to hear, just a little noise to let him know that more than the two prisoners were in the room. Connor unsheathed one of his hidden blades and put his hand on the door.

Or at least, he tried to put his hand on the door. Just as he reached out, the door, instead of staying put, swung open. And Connor found himself staring down at a dark-skinned woman, her hair neatly hidden underneath a white and red cloth and her own set of bracers clamped firmly on her forearms. Behind her were two others, dressed in the colours of the Regulars, and Adams and Hancock, shrugging on the jackets of their uniforms.

For a moment, they all just stared at each other. Then Connor and the woman moved in perfect synchronization.

Their hidden blades flashing, both of them tried to attack, noticed the other attacking, and moved to block. The sound of metal hitting metal seemed to jolt everyone out of their stillness. The woman, taking advantage of Connor's poor stance due to his unreadiness, slammed her shoulder into his chest and knocked him off balance. He staggered back, winded, and watched as the four men darted out behind the woman in disbelief. Then he was forced to dodge as the woman pressed her advantage, parrying her blows.

But he was on the back foot, and the woman was relentless. Slashing his arm, she kicked him between the legs and turned and ran when he wavered and clutched the offended body part. Tears gathering in his eyes, Connor could only struggle back to his feet as he watched her disappear down the stairs, following far slower.
Bursting through the door, there was no sign of her or her escapees and allies. But there was pandemonium.

The fort resembled nothing more than a disturbed anthill. Men were running back and forth, shouting and waving weapons around. They ebbed and flowed like water, crashing around inside of the fort and bouncing off its walls and yet, accomplishing very little. Because as Connor scanned the crowd, there was no sign of the Assassins being caught.

He ground his teeth, furious. He had sent those soldiers to warn the others; to surround the building was no difficult task! And yet all they seemed to have managed was to cause a panic and make it even easier for the Assassins to slip away in the confusion!

Looking across the courtyard again, Connor spotted Major Pitcairn sitting tall astride his restless horse in front of the gates to the outer walls of the fort. He was shouting and pointing, trying and failing to reassert his control over the fort. His voice, usually so easily carried through the air, only added to the noise. Looking at his face, Connor could see the frustration and worry as he looked around and struggled to have his voice heard.

Something about the scene niggled at Connor as he began to push his way through the crowd, though. As overwhelming as the panic seemed to be, there wasn't as many people as Connor knew were inside of the fort. With the amount of noise and commotion that was going on, Connor knew that there should be more people coming out of the buildings.

Reaching Pitcairn's horse, he pushed the questions out of his head. There was no time for that; he had to find the Assassins.

"Major Pitcairn!" he shouted, grabbing the soldier Templar's reins. "There are Assassins in the fort; have you found them?"

Pitcairn paused in the middle of shouting another useless order and looked down at Connor. "No," he said, raising his voice and shaking his head, "those damn boys that carried your message managed to tell every soldier that they found on the way. I've been trying to regain control ever since."

Connor groaned and scrubbed at his face. Breathing in, he stomped down on his anger. "I see," he said. "I saw them as they began to run; would a description help?"

Ruefully, Pitcairn shook his head. "Maybe later," he said, "right now, everyone's either panicking or out in the city trying to put the riot down."

"The riot?"

"A riot started in the city about an hour after you went to bed," Pitcairn said, "I was forced to send out most of my forces to quell it."

Something clicked in Connor's head. A riot, starting the night the Assassins made their move? One that needed most of the army to shut it down?

"Sir," he said, looking up at Pitcairn, "that riot; it was probably a distraction!"

Pitcairn nodded, looking unhappy. "I don't doubt it," he said, "it was too perfectly timed to be anything else."

Anything further that the man wanted to say was cut off as several balls suddenly flew into the crowd and began to hiss, a thick blue-grey smoke filling the air and blocking out the rest of the courtyard. Covering his mouth automatically, Connor wished that he had grabbed his gas mask.
before heading out to check on Adams and Hancock. As it was, he was forced to hold his breath, ignoring the burning in his lungs and his watering eyes as he squinted, trying to make out the indistinct figures through the dense smoke. It was damn close to impossible, though; he had to hand it to the Assassins, they certainly knew their chemicals.

Unsheathing his sword, he settled into a ready stance, his eyes darting around. The yells of the soldiers surrounding them had if anything, gotten louder. However as he listened carefully as his father had taught him, he could pick out the sounds of yells being cut off, their owner's dying gurgles barely audible over their friends' panic.

He bit his lip. Even knowing that soldiers were dying, the smoke was simply too thick to pick out which were the ones falling to the Assassins' blades. Sound was distorted, sounding closer or further away than it actually was and keeping him from locating where the Assassins had been. He was a sitting duck for one of their attacks, a fact that caused his skin to prickle with sweat.

But no attack came for him. The only sign that the Assassins had passed near him was the sudden stiffening from Pitcairn on his horse and the sound of the gate behind them creaking open. Connor's eyes widened in shock at the sound of the gate. Turning away from the smoke in front of him, he was just able to see the smoke stir and swirl from the air being displaced.

"Sir!" he shouted, clapping Pitcairn on the thigh with his free hand, "The Assassins! They've gotten past us and opened the gate! I will follow them, get some soldiers to come after me for backup!"

Pitcairn didn't reply.

"Sir?" Connor asked, reluctant to leave without the assurance that he would be followed by allies. The smoke was thinning now, letting him see blurry, indistinct shadows moving through it towards the gates. If he left now he would be right on their heels, ready to take them out and recapture Adams and Hancock. Even just managing to take out one could possibly keep the others from escaping. From his lectures growing up from the other members of the Order's Inner Circle, he knew that the Assassins placed a great deal of importance on not leaving one of their own behind. Their loyalty to each other had been held up as an example of how a strength could become a weakness by them, especially by Shay. That loyalty, that had them breaking out their own at great risk to themselves, also lead them to often breaking their own Creed by helping criminals; Shay in particular had several stories of the Assassins' support of the gangs of New York, men that had robbed and intimidated with the tacit permission and support of the Order's ancient enemy.

Such lessons had not just been on the weaknesses that such unthinking loyalty caused, though. It had also been on the dangers. Strong ties between groups meant that where an Assassin went, so did their allies. Allies that had far less compunction in attacking an enemy when they were weak or injured. His father in particular had emphasized the Templars' need to cultivate such affections as well, for their own protection if nothing else. But he had also emphasized how they had to select such allies carefully, judging whether or not they were worthy and not just blindly supporting them because they were 'friends'.

The shadows were becoming clearer by the moment. Some milled, confusion rolling off of them in waves, but others, ones that Connor could only just catch glimpses of, moved with far greater purpose, holding onto the wrists of other shadows and seemingly dragging them along after them.

Connor bit his lip. He needed to go after them now, while he still could. "Sir," he said, glancing up at Pitcairn, "I -"

Pitcairn, still sitting astride his horse, was staring down, puzzled at the sight of the hilt of a knife sprouting from his chest.
Connor froze, his mind screeching to a halt. How -

Pitcairn began to list to the side, falling like a leaf from a tree in autumn; slowly and waveringly. Connor jolted into action and reached out, barely catching him before he fell to the dirt.

The rich scent of blood filled Connor's nose. Pitcairn's coat, already red, was being dyed a darker shade as he watched, creeping its way across the older man's chest from the knife. The smoke that surrounded them continued to thin as Connor gently laid him to the ground.

The figures rapidly sharpened. Looking up from his superior's injuries, Connor narrowed his eyes. There were the false soldiers and the slave girl, leading Adams and Hancock away from their actions.

Beneath his hands, Pitcairn moaned. It was a weak and thready sound. Looking back down, Connor could see him getting paler by the second, his eyelids fluttering and breath roughening. He grit his teeth, looking back at the Assassins running away. He had to make a decision; stay and keep Pitcairn from dying, or run after the Assassins and keep them from getting away with Adams and Hancock, possibly starting a war?

Stay and save one of his honorary uncle's lives, or stop a war?
Stay and save one of his honorary uncle's lives, or stop a war?
Stay and save one of his honorary uncle's lives, or stop a war?
A good Templar would have stopped the Assassins and rebels. A good Templar would have continued his mission to bring peace and order to the colonies and willingly sacrificed one person's life to save thousands.

Connor guessed that he was not a very good Templar.

Frustrated, he pulled out one of his throwing knives and hurled it towards the nearest Assassin. It struck home - the man fell with a shout, the knife sticking out of his thigh very close to the back of his knee - but Connor didn't have the time to appreciate that. Ripping off his jacket, he quickly bundled it around the knife and pressed down firmly, trying to stop the worst of the bleeding.

Looking up, he very nearly rolled his eyes at how the soldiers were still milling around. To their credit, most of the closest soldiers seemed to have noticed their leader falling from his horse with a knife in his chest, but those further away still seemed to be running around like children that had gorged themselves on sweets. Someone had to take control.

Luckily, taking control was something that Connor had been groomed to do for much of his life. Keeping one hand on Pitcairn's chest to keep pressure on the wound, he pointed with a dripping finger to the nearest private.

"You!" he shouted.

The private started, jumping slightly and pointing at himself.

"Yes, you! Go get the closest doctor; the Major needs one right now!" Connor tried to inject his voice with every bit of authority and expectation of being obeyed that he had heard in his own father's voice. He was darker-skinned than the other men here, a fact that he had heard grumbling about over the last week, but hopefully him seeming to know what he was doing would have people listening to him. People craved to be told what to do, after all.
The man, really more of a boy at the second look, nodded so fast Connor thought his head would fly off. Turning, he dashed off in a random direction, his arms and legs flailing.

Satisfied that that part of the plan had gone off without a hitch, Connor turned back to the other soldiers that were still milling around.

"You," he said, pointing towards another soldier, this one a captain, "come over here and help me keep pressure on the Major's injury. The rest of you," he said, raising his voice, "know that the intruders that caused this are currently running in that direction and that they must be stopped! There will be a reward for whoever brings them in alive! Now go and close the gates to the city before they escape!"

The men did not question him. His commanding tone had worked. As they surged and began to move away, dragging the other, still-panicking soldiers with them, the private returned. Panting furiously, he was holding a rather ruffled-looking doctor by the wrist.

"Sir," he gasped, "I came back as soon as I -"

"That's enough, lad," the doctor interrupted, dropping to his knees beside Connor. "Now tell me, did you see who threw the knife?"

Connor shook his head, his braid bouncing against his cheek. The doctor grunted.

"Pity," he said. "If the man was still here and had a set of knives - but no matter. There's a life to save, and I hope that you gentlemen are up to helping me do so."

Later on, Connor would not be able to precisely remember what it was like, saving Pitcairn's life in the pounded-down dirt by Southgate's gate. All he would be able to accurately say that he remembered was blood flowing over his hands and coating them like a pair of gloves, and the way that the knife glinted in the moonlight. What he remembered most, though, was leaning back, the doctor saying that he had done all that could be done, and that it was in God's hands now.

As the soldiers trickled back into the courtyard and fashioned a stretcher to take Pitcairn away, Connor stayed kneeling in the dirt. Looking down at his blood-coated hands, he saw that they were shaking. He wondered why. This was not his first time getting so much blood on his hands literally, nor would it likely be the last.

"Well," muttered the doctor, wiping his hands down, "that was rather exciting. Would you like me to do something about him as well, while I'm here?"

Connor blinked slowly, turning his head to look at the man. "What?" he asked, his exhaustion seeping into his voice.

The doctor jerked his head towards the gate, still scrubbing at his hands. "That man over there," he said, "with the knife in his leg."

Feeling like his neck was made of plates of rusty metal, grinding and protesting against each other, Connor turned his head to see what the man was pointing at.

Oh.

The Assassin that he had thrown a knife at was still lying on the ground by the gate, barely moving. Just rolling around slightly, clutching his leg and groaning.

Rage welled up in Connor's chest. Climbing to his feet, he strode over to the groaning lump of
meet, clenching and unclenching his fists. This man, this Assassin - he had just condemned all thirteen colonies to war. He and his fellows had nearly killed Major Pitcairn, one of the most caring soldiers in the army. Thousands would now die, all because the Assassins had helped Adams and Hancock escape!

He wanted to kill the man then and there. Slit his throat with one of his knives. Shoot him in the head. Just raise up his boot and bring it down on the Assassin's head over and over until it was nothing but a red smear. But standing there, breathing in and out and struggling to control himself, a voice began to speak from the back of Connor's mind. A voice that sounded suspiciously like his father.

It reminded him that as part of the rescue party, the man most likely knew where the Assassins would stash the rebel leaders, and that to waste such a possibility would be what would truly ruin the entire mission. Such information would be what would salvage everything; what would keep Pitcairn's injuries and possibly death from being a waste.

So Connor didn't slit the man's throat. Nor did he shoot him, or stomp him to death. Instead, he simply reached down and pressed his fingers against some very important arteries in the Assassin's neck until he stopped moving.

He would not let this land slide into war.
Kanen'to:kon pressed his knuckles against his burning eyes and gritted his teeth. Across the table from him, Saint-Prix rubbed his face. Aveline, for her part, was a tense, silent presence by the door. And Joe -

Joe had fled the room the moment Will had been uncovered, his shoulders shaking. Swallowing his own sorrow, Kanen'to:kon let his hands fall back to his sides. He would have to go after Joe later, to help comfort him. He and Will had had an odd friendship, based more on teasing and insults than anything else, but the affection in their tones even as they had hurled such vile poison at each other had revealed the lie of their apparent anger towards each other. He was obviously devastated by the state of his friend, and would need his living friends to rally around him so that he did not fall into total grief.

Will's body had barely been recognizable when they found it in the ditch a week after freeing Adams and Hancock from Southgate Fort. His sandy hair ripped out in chunks, leaving raw bloody patches, limbs broken and twisted and clouded eyes staring up sightlessly at the clouded-over sky. Worst of all, the ditch that it was in was right by a safehouse. Combined with how there had been several attacks on other boltholes and hiding spots over the last few weeks, it was clear what had happened.

Will had been kept alive. He had been tortured for information. And he had broken.

Why hadn't Kanen'to:kon insisted on going back? Why had he let the others talk him into believing that Will had already been dead by the time Adams and Hancock had been hidden again? Remembering the sheet-covered corpse that had once been a friend, he could still see the look of hopelessness on his battered face in his mind's eye.

He should have gone back. Looking up at Saint-Prix, he could see the same regrets crossing her face.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you two this," he said, his voice soft and far more sympathetic than Kanen'to:kon thought he had ever heard it be before. "I was told that you were friends."

Kanen'to:kon pressed his lips together, not trusting his voice, and nodded shakily.

Cocking his head to one side, his eyes soft, the older goateed man reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "This was given to us a few hours after William's body was found," he said. "It was from the Sons of Liberty." Bowing his head slightly once Kanen'to:kon had taken it, he took a few soft steps towards the door before pausing and turning back.

"I know that we are not particularly, ah, 'buddy-buddy'," he said, "but if either of you need someone to talk to, Madame Scott and I are here for you."

"Thank you," Aveline said quietly, walking over to Kanen'to:kon where he was sitting on the couch, "but I think that right now we would like to be alone."

Bowing his head again, Saint-Prix slipped out of the room, leaving the two of them alone.

More to keep from bursting into guilty tears than any real curiosity as to what a bunch of white men had to say, Kanen'to:kon opened the letter and began to read. Aveline, her green skirt swishing in the silence of the room, sat down beside him and began to scan the paper over his shoulder. And then, as his eyes flicked the lines, he began to frown as well, his gut curdling with rage until he
threw the paper across the room with a snarl.

"We thank you for your help," he mocked bitterly. "Could they not be bothered to come and tell us that in person at one of our meetings?"

Aveline did not reply, merely placing her hand on top of his and squeezing it.

Rubbing his face with his other hand, Kanen'to:kon growled and squeezed his eyes shut. "I hate them," he complained. "I hate their arrogance, the way they treat us like servants and act as if we are the supplicants." he cut himself of as he began to choke on his anger. It felt like his throat was swelling shut.

Aveline's small, tough hand cupped his jaw. Opening his eyes, he just saw her leaning forward before her soft lips brushed against his cheek.

His anger draining from him, all he could do was blink rapidly when she pulled back. Patting his hands, she said, "I know. They are irritating and arrogant. But that does not mean that they deserve to die. And by saving Adams and Hancock, we are making sure that future generations will be free."

Kanen'to:kon just continued to blink. She had kissed him. On the cheek, for sure, but kissing was a serious thing in his culture and Aveline knew that, he thought. So why...

Oh. He could see just the faintest hints of a blush on her cheeks.

Part of Kanen'to:kon was worried; he had left the village and joined the Assassins out of love for Ratonhnhake:ton. But the rest of him was remembering how Aveline had been with him for years, now. How Ratonhnhake:ton was working with the Templars. And that part, well; it wanted to kiss her back.

So he did.

Ellen and Lyle's wedding was beautiful. The two of them had been glowing as they made their vows to each other in front of the local priest; Maria, their daughter, had danced in place as she watched, a wide smile across her face. And now, dancing in middle of the shared backyard with all of their neighbours celebrating along with them, they were like the sun that all the other dancing couples orbited around, so obvious their happiness was.

And yet, sitting at one of the tables that ringed the yard with a nearly-full mug of ale in his hand, Connor felt cold. Even on such a happy occasion, he couldn't keep his mind from going over the events of the previous month and how all of the Templar's plans to peacefully free the colonies had fallen into a cesspit.

Things had started with Pitcairn's injuries. The knife that the Assassins had thrown into his chest had been very close to heart, almost too close for the doctor to be willing to even try to help. Even once it was out, though, he nearly bled to death. About the only break that he caught was that the injury was not infected by the time Connor was recalled home. As it was though, he was in no shape to stay in the army, and the news of his honorable discharge had quickly trickled down the ranks and caused widespread outcry. Pitcairn was a popular leader, and his men were saddened to see him go.

And then it had just gotten worse. With Adams and Hancock free to keep the rebels organized, what had started as a standoff had dissolved into a full-blown war. Glancing up from his mug, Connor looked over the sea of faces present. He wondered how many of the young men currently
dancing would die in the coming months. Which side would take the heavier losses, bleed the most? He felt so ashamed of his failure that he could hardly bear to show his face at home, knowing the disappointment that everyone must have been feeling towards him.

"Connor?"

Jerked out of his morose thoughts, Connor blinked and looked to his side. Maria was standing there, twisting her fingers in her new red skirt. She had been thrilled to get it from her mother to wear at the wedding; when Connor had arrived, she had insisted on twirling for him, enjoying how the fabric flared out.

"I am sorry," Connor replied, trying to smile for the young girl. Placing his barely-touched mug down, he then folded his hands in front of him. "I did not catch what you asked."

"I was just asking if you were okay," she said, blinking innocently. "You looked so sad over here."

Oh. He had rather thought that he had managed to keep his darker emotions off of his face. Keeping his stiff smile on his face, he tried to think of what to say.

"I am alright, Maria. I simply have a lot on my mind," he said, settling on keeping things vague. "I did not mean to be such poor company on this night."

The young girl stuck out her lower lip and chewed on it, narrowing her eyes at him. "You shouldn't have those types of thoughts," she said accusingly. "Today's a happy day. Mother's married again, to a much nicer man than Father was."

Looking back at the still-dancing couple, Connor felt a little bit of true joy enter his expression. "Yes," he said softly. "They do look good together, don't they?"

Maria nodded furiously. "Yes," she said, as serious as could be. "They liked each other from the moment Mother woke up after what Father did to her. I could tell. They just didn't really do anything about it until Mother was done mourning Father appropriately. I don't know why she waited; Father wouldn't have."

"Well," Connor said, "sometimes it has less to do with what you think and more to do with what everyone else thinks."

Maria wrinkled her nose at his words. "That's silly," she declared. "Mother was smiling in the first few minutes of talking to Lyle. She never did that with Father. When she found out that he was dead, she should have told the neighbours to butt out, especially Mrs. O'Neill!"

Her voice had risen slightly as she spoke, making Connor look around in alarm. "Yes, perhaps," he said hurriedly, "but that is not something that should be trumpeted so loudly. It might be embarrassing for your mother right now."

Instantly, the young girl was the picture of contrition. "Oh," she said, clasping her hands in front of her chest, "I wouldn't want to do that!"

"I have no doubt that you don't," came a very familiar voice.

Connor turned around in his chair to see Gillian standing at the mouth of the alleyway leading to the street. Dressed in a dark green skirt and jacket trimmed with delicate lace, she smiled fondly at him and lifted her skirt to keep the hem from dragging in the mud as she walked towards him. He smiled back at her, a true smile, and climbed to his feet, holding out his hand.
"Connor," she said, practically purring his name as she took his hand in a firm grip, "I have missed seeing you lately; there's been so much to discuss and yet I've seen so little of you!" His smile faltered a little at that, and he bowed his head in contrition.

"I am sorry," he replied, "but as I was saying to Maria -"

"You've had a lot on your mind." She wasn't letting go of his hand. Most likely she feared that he would run off again if he did. "Well, I'm afraid that I'm not going to take that as an excuse anymore. Maria," she said, suddenly turning her attention to the young girl, "I hope you won't mind if I take this morose lump back to his house. I'm not the only one who's been wanting to talk to him lately; his father's been worried as well."

Maria frowned, her face morphing into a comically stern thinking look. "I suppose," she said, doubt clear in her words, "if his father wants him back, we can't keep him, can we?"

Steeling himself, Connor tried to smile at Maria once more. "I'm afraid not," he said. "When my father speaks, I must listen."

"Alright then," she said, her voice serious. "But Mother and Lyle will want to see you again tomorrow, I'm sure."

Promising to do just that, Connor then endured the gauntlet of questions from all sides that it took to collect his belongings and remove himself from the party. Deflecting them was not hard; a simple vague statement of 'not feeling well' had most satisfied, but for Connor, having to do so on top of a day filled with people already had him exhausted. By the time he joined Gillian in the street, waiting by a carriage, he was ready to simply go home and collapse into bed.

"So," Gillian said, twining her arm with his as they sat down in the rickety carriage, "how was the wedding?"

"Beautiful," Connor replied, "but tiring."

"And still you went," she said. "How very noble."

Connor closed his eyes. "I am sorry," he said, "but what is wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," Gillian said, "I've just been chasing after you for weeks to talk about the business and all you've been doing is holing yourself up in your room and sulking."

"I was not -" Connor caught himself and sighed. "Alright; perhaps I was sulking."

Gillian sniffed. "You really were, and for no good reason that I could tell, either."

"Gillian." Connor stopped them and faced the red-haired woman. "Gillian. I failed. Adams and Hancock escaped and now these colonies are at war with the British. Major Pitcairn nearly died and even now has been ejected from the army due to his health. We have come uncomfortably close to losing control of the situation in these lands and now we have lost our best source in the British army - how is that not a good reason to be depressed?"

Gillian, who had been still all throughout his speech, frowned. Reaching up, she cupped his jaw and looked him in the eye sternly. "Connor," she said. "None of that was your fault." She cut him off sharply with a gesture, squeezing his jaw slightly as he tried to protest. "You did your part to perfection - more than perfection. You retrieved the rebels, you guarded them - when things went to shit, you were the one that took control of the situation and saved Major Pitcairn's life. You even managed to capture one of the Assassins! No one could have asked for more from you."
The words were true, but they did not help the shame curling in Connor's gut. Gillian sighed.

"I have spoken with your father, Connor," she continued, her voice softening. "He is not angry with you."

Connor did not reply. He did not believe her.

Gillian sighed again, but retreated in the face of his conviction. Staring out the window at the passing buildings, Connor let the rest of the trip pass in silence. Even as the wooden building became bigger and nicer, eventually gaining green lawns and being placed further from each other, he did not speak. It was only when they finally reached the intimidating bulk of his home that he finally spoke.

"For what it is worth," he said quietly as he helped Gillian climb out, "I am sorry that I did not end up finding the time to speak to you about the business while I was in Boston. I did not intend to force you to come all of the way down here."

Oddly enough, Gillian only smiled mysteriously at his words. "Oh, believe me," she said, "it was no trouble at all."

Something about the smile raised a red flag in Connor's hindbrain. She looked at him as if she was aware of something that he wasn't, and suddenly he was struck by the powerful urge to grab her and insist that she tell him what was going on right now. But he didn't.

Instead he went inside after her, trying to ignore the churning of his gut. Inside of the house was quiet and dim, all of the servants either having returned to their own homes or gone to bed. So he was surprised to see Fillian sitting on the stairwell, looking as if they had been waiting up for him.

"Connor," said Fillian, springing to his feet, "we have been looking everywhere for you -"

"- Which you wouldn't have had to do if you had just asked his father where he was, like I did -" Gillian interjected.

"- Now come on! You will be late!" Fillian gestured to him frantically.

Glancing in confusion at Gillian, Connor allowed his wrist to be grabbed so that he could be dragged down the house's main hallway. She was annoyingly opaque, merely looking quite pleased with herself as she followed at a more sedate pace behind them.

Stopping in front of the doors leading to the dining room, Fillian whirled on his heel and eyeballed him critically. Reaching out, he began to straighten Connor's clothes, neatening his appearance considerably. His jacket's collar was laid flat against his shoulders and his shirt smoothed until it was free of wrinkles all down his front. Connor only stopped the younger man when he licked his hand and reached out to smooth down Connor's hair.

Catching the blond man's wrist in his hand, Connor narrowed his eyes.

"What is all this about?" he asked, keeping a firm hold of his friend's wrist. "What are you so worried about?"

For a moment, Fillian gaped at him. Then he turned to his sister with an accusing look in his eye.

"I thought that you were going to tell him?" he hissed, sounding almost accusatory.

Gillian shrugged nonchalantly. "There was no time," she said, almost sounding sincere. Gently
prying Connor's fingers off of her younger sibling's wrist, she patted him on the back.

"Just remember what I said on the way here," she whispered as she turned him to face the doors. "Now go; your father and the others are waiting."

Connor very nearly dug his heels in. But the doors promptly swung open and then he was in the dining room with several eyes firmly on him, forcing any thought of questioning Gillian out of his mind.

Everyone was there. His Uncle Thomas, Uncle Charles, Uncle Shay, Mister Weekes, Mister Gist, that new sea captain that they had recruited a few years before - and of course, there at head of the table under the portrait that he had had painted when Connor was twelve, his father.

As he carefully walked in, Connor's mind began to flail around like a turtle turned on its back. Even as his father began to talk, his mind continued to flail.

"Ratonhnhake:ton;" he said, tucking his hands behind his back, "Connor. Since you have begun to work with our Order, you have managed to save the lives of two of the members of our Inner Circle. You have brought several of your fellow men into our fold, enriching our efforts to bring peace and order to the frontier of these colonies. You have even managed to salvage our plans by capturing an Assassin and allowing us to strike a severe blow to their infrastructure while facing defeat. For these reasons and more, it has been decided that you deserve to be fully welcomed into our Brotherhood."

Connor's ears were ringing as he folded his hands in front of him, automatically straightening his back. He very nearly missed his father's next question, so great was his surprise.

"Do you swear to adhere to our principles of peace and order?"

Connor's lips were numb, just barely managing to shape a reply.

"I do."

"Do you swear to never divulge our secrets, or the nature of our secrets?"

"I do."

"And do you swear to do so until death, no matter what the cost?"

Connor swallowed.

"I do."

"Then I welcome you now, as one of our brothers." Haytham gestured to Uncle Shay, who was standing closest to Connor. The Irish man's lips briefly twisted into a grin as he held out a silver ring inset with a red ruby cross. Reverently, Connor took it and slipped it onto his right ring finger, dazzled with how the ruby stone shone in the dim light of the room.

"You are a Templar."

Looking up, Connor saw his father smiling and radiating pride. Shyly, he smiled back.
The only source of heat for miles was her burning home.

Dragging herself across the frost-frozen ground, her fingertips splitting open and bleeding as they rasped across the frozen-solid earth, Emily Burke wanted to sob. The ring of bruises around her throat wouldn't let her though.

Why had they let that man in?

Things had been tough out in the middle of the frontier. With the attacks from both the Indians and the raiders, the last few years had been difficult for everyone. Her father, a gentle man and farmer, had been forced to allow her to go hunting with her brothers if they wanted to have enough to eat throughout the winter, something that he did not like. It was dangerous to try and bring his crops to the nearest market though, and they couldn't exclusively eat what they grew. Survival had been the word on the forefront of everyone's mind.

But still, he had tried to keep them from completely regressing and focusing only on their survival. Papa had insisted they read the Bible together, eat together, even do the laundry together. Whenever a traveler passed by, they took them in and shared what they had to remind them all that they were still human beings. Usually the people were thankful, sharing their own stories of their travels and doing a few chores for them.

But not this one.

The tall man had made her shudder the moment she saw him. He had been quiet, yes, but so were plenty of the frontiersmen they had given lodging to. He had been secretive, too, always hunched over a little bag that had held an odd golden ball that Emily had only seen by accident when he had been helping chop some wood.

His eyes, though. Those hadn't been human eyes. Those had been animal eyes; eyes like that one thin wolf that had nearly torn her brother's throat out last winter, dead and unfeeling and nothing but a bundle of savage instincts given flesh.

She should have known from those eyes. She should have stayed, not gone out with her older brother to check their snares. But she hadn't; she and her brother had dawdled, teasing each other, her pouting because she didn't get as many rabbits as he did. By the time they had returned, Father had already been dead, his throat slit in his favourite chair. So had Mother, and Emily's littlest brother, just barely breeched and now with his head cracked open by the fireplace -

Emily collapsed, sobbing, uncaring of the cold that was now piercing her flesh.

Why? Why had such a thing happened to her? Did God truly disapprove of her doing manly things? Was that why her older brother had died with an axe in his gut? Why she had been left alive long enough for the man to hold her down and beat her until she lay still and let him do as he wished? Things that made her want to crawl back into that fire and be with her family?

No, no. She couldn't think like that. Her family - her family -

Emily swallowed and gulped down an icy breath that froze in her lungs, pressing her forehead to
the cold ground. She couldn't die. Not here. If this had been God's will, then he could stick it up his ass. Tears leaving hot tracks down her face, she forced herself to stop crawling.

As isolated as they had been, they had still been close enough to a hunting association's cabin for hunters to visit regularly, even if they hadn't needed to stay with them. One of the hunters in particular, he had talked to her father a lot.

His name, she thought numbly to herself as she shakily put one foot in front of the other. What had been his name? She couldn't remember it now, but she remembered that sign that he had shown her father that one time. He had been so upset, said that he was not a violent man and that the hunter hadn't been welcome in their home anymore - it had taken mother the better part of a month to calm him down and a year before the man had been allowed to return. Emily sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand, clutching the shredded remains of her chemise around her.

That sign. It was a violent sign, her father had said. Emily had thought it was actually rather pretty. Two straight lines met with a curved one at the bottom. But it was a violent sign anyways. Emily would need that though. Her Papa wouldn't have approved, she knew. But blood called for blood. And she would need a violent sign to show her how to shed it, to pay back the Hessian for the blood that he had shed of hers.

"You wanted to see me, father?" Connor asked, poking his head into the room.

Haytham looked up from his papers. He looked a far cry from his usual put-together self; dark circles ringed his eyes and a few strands of silver hair were falling loose from his usual queue. Combined with his rumpled clothing and overflowing desk, he looked less like a Templar Grand Master and more like an overworked accountant.

A stab of anger lanced through Connor like a lightning strike. It had been over a year since that ridiculous Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress down in Philadelphia, and they were still playing catch-up. Once Adams and Hancock had escaped from Southgate with the Assassins, events had rolled onwards with all of the power of a great rogue wave at sea. What had once been a grand plan to peacefully be granted their own government by the British Empire had been completely shattered beyond repair, and now many of the best men to lead such a government were no longer suitable, leaving them scrambling to replace them.

And so his father had been working double-time, from sunrise to sunset and beyond. Crouched over his desk, his candles guttering in their own melted wax and his hair going whiter by the day. Connor had tried to make him take breaks, him and Mrs. Potts scheming together over their informal teas. But his father was a stubborn and devoted man, not easily drawn away from his work.

Despite his appearance, though, his voice was as smooth and confident as ever. "Ah, yes," he said, pulling a sheaf of papers from what seemed to be a random pile, "please, sit down."

Slipping into the room, Connor padded silently over the lush oriental carpet before sitting in one of the room's stiff-backed chairs that were positioned in front of the desk. Dimly, he could remember a far more comfortable study from back when the two of them had lived in Boston, with softer chairs settled around a fire. It had been years, though, since they had lived there, and so it was this study had informed Connor's idea of what a Grand Master's role in the Order was like more than any other; uncomfortable and hard, with only a few small perks to make the situation liveable.

Glancing down at the papers in front of him, his father's brow knit together. "And how was your visit to Mr. and Mrs. White today?" he asked, clearly not paying attention.
That did not keep Connor from speaking, however. "Lyle and Ellen are fine," he said. "Ellen is getting larger by the day, but Maria has been helping with fetching fabrics and shopping, so all she has had to do lately is sit and sew. Lyle estimates that the baby should be born sometime this winter, so they have been trying to look at getting a new crib along with other things. Apparently Quincent sold Maria's to pay for a bout of drinking one month along with other pieces of furniture, so they will have to commission a new piece."

Haytham grunted. "I see," he said absentmindedly. "I'll be sure to send along my congratulations when the child is born, then." Looking up, he straightened the papers he had been looking over. "In any case, that was not why I called you in. I have a new mission for you."

Connor leaned forward in his seat. "How long will it take?"

"I'm not sure," Haytham admitted. "It's not like the usual mission that I put you on, though it will most likely involve going through the frontier. Nearly a year ago, I received an odd letter from the Grand Master of the Italian Rite, asking for a favour."

Connor cocked his head to one side. While the Colonial Rite was far from isolated from the rest of the world, it still as a matter of course mainly interacted only with the English Rite. It was very unusual for other Grand Masters to try and contact his father, let alone ask for a favour.

"What did he want?"

"Help, apparently." Pulling out a single piece of paper from the sheaf in front of him, he handed it to Connor. Taking it, the younger man peered closely at it. Immediately, he identified the looping writing as Italian. Scanning it, a tale of overdramatic woe wove itself in his mind.

Apparently, Master Andretti had recently found himself on the trail of a peculiar man who had somehow gotten his hands on an Apple of Eden in Rome, opening a temple underneath the Pantheon. Immediately giving chase (which was an epic tale, involving horses, gunfire and three fainting ladies) his Rite had managed to track the man all the way to Spain before losing him to a ship headed to the New World. Because of that, he was respectfully requesting that Haytham keep an eye out for the Piece of Eden and the man and when he found him, it would be terribly nice if he could just send the device back, if it wasn't too much trouble?

Glancing up from the paper, Connor looked at his father's grim face. "I take it that you did not manage to find the man, then?" he asked.

His father shook his head. "Actually, finding the man was no trouble. Gerhard von Statten tracked him down fairly quickly. The problem is that after this, von Statten didn't report back with the Apple."

Connor frowned. He did not know much about the Hessian, only that he was highly professional and seemed to have no real personality outside of fighting. Still, the fact that he hadn't returned definitely implied that something was very wrong.

"What do you think happened?"

His father sighed and leaned back in his chair, drumming his fingers along the edge of his desk. "Well," he noted gustily, "at first I thought that the man had gotten a lucky shot in and escaped. That was put to rest when his body was retrieved from the harbour without the Apple on him. Then I thought that perhaps someone else had found the Apple and von Statten was simply tracking them down before reporting -"
He cut himself off at Connor's confused look and flashed him a fond smile. "Regrettably," he said, "not everyone is quite as conscientious about sending regular reports as you are. Von Statten in particular only gives one in once he has finished his assignment."

"But something happened," Connor said, steering the conversation back on track. His gut was slowly curling itself into a knot. "You found something out about the Hessian."

Any trace of amusement on Haytham's face quickly slid off and he gave a short, sharp nod.

"Generally, von Statten is under the nominal command of General Davenport, moving around to different regiments as needed. It was him that let me know what, precisely, our German friend has apparently been up to lately." Pulling out yet another few sheets of paper, he handed those ones over to Connor as well.

"He's been spotted out in the frontier, apparently, far from any real sign of civilization," he said as Connor flipped through Davenport's report.

"Killing people."

"Yes."

Connor bit the inside of his cheek. Looking over General Davenport's words (and he would never get used to the man's last name, never; how could it be the same as the Assassin Mentor's anyways? It just seemed to be a joke of the universe to him), an ugly picture was beginning to take shape.

The Hessian was known for his love of violence. That was one of the reasons that he had been hired, in fact. Connor was not fond of that fact; he was no pacifist, but the idea of someone that took joy in hurting others just didn't sit well with him. However, von Statten had always toed the line, only ever attacking those that either Haytham or General Davenport pointed him towards.

But what was being described in General Davenport's letter was not the narrowly focused if intense violence that was von Statten's usual mark. Rather than just one or two people being lingered over, it had apparently looked as if the entire families were being butchered en masse in a frenzy. Fires had been set in a clumsy attempt to cover tracks, and again and again, there was mention of the Hessian holding or looking over a strange golden ball.

Looking up from the papers, Connor mirrored his father's grim expression.

"Von Statten has gone rogue," he stated.

His father nodded. "That is the leading theory," he said heavily.

"What do you propose?" Connor asked. Carefully, he set the papers back on his father's desk.

Leaning forward, Haytham steepled his fingers. "I need someone out there retrieving that damned Piece of Eden and taking care of von Statten. A vicious dog, I can use. A mad one, however, is a liability."

"Von Statten will not go down easily."

"That," his father said, pulling out yet another piece of paper and handing it to him, "is why I am giving you this. It's a order for any of our members in the area to drop what they are doing and assist you in your endeavours."
Taking it, Connor scanned it with raised eyebrows. "This is," he said, stunned, "quite something."

His father edged sharply. "I do not give it lightly," he warned. "But, if for some reason someone refuses or kicks up a fuss and you cannot convince them otherwise -" his father closed his eyes, looking pained, "do not engage von Statten anyways. I know -" he said, holding up an arm as Connor stiffened and opened his mouth to argue, "I know that you feel that you still need to earn your Knighthood. You are wrong, but I understand your feelings."

"However," he continued, pinning Connor with his pale eyes, "von Statten is not the opponent for you to prove yourself against. If you can not get any back up for when you take him down, I am ordering you now to stand down and wait until they arrive. Am I understood?"

Connor bit the inside of his cheek. How was he supposed to hold himself back when people were in trouble? But looking at his father's expression, he knew that this was not a negotiable point. So reluctantly, he nodded.

Of course, he thought as he burrowed deeper into his cloak with the cold autumn wind whistling through the tree above, his father had probably expected him to have to do so by now. He had to be disappointed in how slow things were going.

With frosted-over leaves crunching underneath his horse's hooves, Connor continued to leisurely ride on Akweks towards one of the frontier's main information brokers. A family of five, settling down just a tiny bit further away from the main town than their neighbours, heading deeper into the frontier than most did. They were not Templars, but with where they lived, they could hardly help but notice many of the goings-ons in the frontier. Personally, Connor rather liked them; the father especially seemed to truly believe in being charitable with his neighbours, regardless of where they came from, and Connor couldn't help but wish that more colonists were like him. People like that, he could see his people living side by side with peacefully.

Yes, the Burke's were good people. Digging his heels into Akweks' sides a little, he had the horse break into a trot. He couldn't wait to see them again.

Closing his eyes, Connor lost himself in the forest for a few moments. The crisp smell of autumn, hinting at frosts and snows to come and cover all of the dying plantlife was a familiar and comforting one. Whether he was at his father's house or in his village, the smell was one of the few things that connected those two parts of his life, however tenuously.

He missed his village sometimes; more and more as the years passed. With all of his responsibilities in the Order, he had not been able to visit it for nearly two whole years. He would have to go back sometime soon, and see everyone -

The smell hit him like a slap in the face. Then the sight.

Pulling on Akweks' reins, Connor came to a halt and stared at the burnt-out shell that had been the Burke's family home. The timbers of the building, blackened with soot, straggled into the sky like skeletal fingers. Ash lay thick on the ground, almost like snow. Distantly, he was aware of sliding off of his horse and walking closer to the building as if he was in a trance. There were blackened figures in the white white ash, like tree branches underneath snow. Tree branches that split at the ends into five twigs.

Connor covered his mouth and swallowed convulsively. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Memories, long buried, stirred and began to rise to the front of his mind. Much like a volcano, they
stirred slowly, and then burst out all at once, covering everything. He knew that those were hands despite the fire damage because of how he had found his mother after the fire, still trapped underneath those beams with her skin darkened to black and flaking off to reveal her still-red insides, her lips pulled back in what he had learned later was just an effect of the heat from the fire but to his four-year-old mind was a scream -

Shaking and trying not to vomit, Connor struggled to get himself back under control. He was a Templar Knight. He believed in controlling oneself, in setting an example for all others even when no one was watching. He could not fall apart just because of some memories, he had to complete his mission!

With his preoccupation in getting himself back under control, he didn't hear the soft crunch of two other sets of footsteps moving through the frosted leaves. Nor did he hear the soft gasp of surprise when they saw him. But he did feel the barrel of a pistol pressing against his head. And he most definitely heard the woman's French-accented voice ordering him to get on his knees.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so, sorry for the unannounced hiatus. I was just getting a little burnt out on this story and needed a break with another fandom. Anyways, I'm back, with the second to last story arc. Hope you guys enjoy, and don't be afraid to let me know in the comments!
Pistols were not the most accurate of weapons. Outside of a few feet, one was better off using a bow and arrow if they wanted to actually hit something. But with the cold metal barrel of the pistol firmly pressed against his scalp, Connor knew that accuracy was not the problem.

He licked his lips and breathed in carefully.

"I said," the woman ordered, her slightly-accented voice hard and cold as a frozen knife, "get on your knees, Templar."

Damn. Connor closed his eyes. He had been hoping that it was just some hunter, or perhaps one of the women that had called the little cabin home. If that were the case, then Connor would just explain himself to them. The name-calling dashed those hopes, though. It was an Assassin behind him. And an Assassin was unlikely to listen to his words.

Slowly and carefully, Connor began to lower himself down to the frozen ground. His nerves singing, he kept alert for any sound of the gun wavering behind him.

"That's better," the woman cooed. "Now," she said, slowly walking around to face him while keeping her gun trained on his head, "what is a Templar doing out here? Looking for more families to murder?"

Anger surged through Connor at the dark-skinned woman's words. Glaring up into her dark brown eyes, he didn't want to even honor such an accusation with and answer. With the way she was cocking her gun, though, he didn't have a choice.

"Hardly," he growled, summoning his father's most disdainful look. "I was simply looking for the family that had inhabited this home to ask some questions."

"Well," she said, returning his cold glare with her own frigid look, "I'm afraid that I can't allow that."

But with that frigid look, she had made a mistake. Her gun, formerly so firmly fixed on his head, drifted ever so slightly to the side.

Connor struck. Surging forward, he ducked under the barrel and grabbed her wrist, violently pushing it up just as she pulled the trigger. The thunderous boom sent a sharp pain through his ear and her grimaced. His momentum was too much to stop though, and he used it mercilessly as the woman bared her teeth. Keeping a firm hold of her gun hand, something glinted in the corner of his eye. A hidden blade. His own bracer deflected that easily, but not her headbutt.

The two of them fell onto the ground, spitting and snarling. Connor's head was pounding from the headbutt, but he didn't let go of the woman's arms. He did, however, resentfully wonder what precisely her skull was made up out of.

Growling, the woman managed to get a leg between the two of them, Savagely, she slammed it into his chest, knocking the breath right out of him and forcing him to let go. Stumbling back, he just barely managed to keep from falling flat on his ass. With his chest screaming in pain, he reached to his side and drew out his sword. The woman did the same, tossing her gun aside and pulling out what looked to be a sugarcane machete.

"WAIT!"
A yell interrupted them, just as they were settling into ready stances. The woman's eyes darted to the side, towards the voice, and Connor made his move. Pointing out his sword towards her chest, he surged forward, ready to skewer the woman.

"Stop!"

A tanned hand clamped down on his wrist, stopping him just as the tip of the sword brushed against the woman's chest. Unsheathing his hidden blade on his free hand, Connor snarled and went to push it into his new attacker's throat when he just happened to look up into the other man's face.

Kanen'to:kon's round face, not so round now that his baby fat had melted off, stared back at him pleadingly.

Connor's sword dropped from nerveless fingers. As Kanen'to:kon let go, he stumbled back, shock rolling through him in waves and his ears ringing.

What was Kanen'to:kon doing here? Raking his gaze up and down his erstwhile friend's frame, dread began to coil in his gut. The sash, the white hood, the bracers with metal gleaming at his wrists - his friend was an Assassin, and a master one too if his father's lessons on the different Assassin classes was still accurate.

No. No, his gentle friend couldn't -

Connor bit the inside of his cheek as Kanen'to:kon turned and placed his hands on the woman's shoulders, asking if she was alright. Swallowing, his trained eyes took in the similarities of their clothes even as his mind rebelled. He didn't want to admit it to himself, but he had not been raised to be a fool or delusional. His clothing, the way he was checking on the female Assassin, there was only one explanation. Somehow, his friend, the boy he practiced kissing with and talked to about his worries, the boy that he had been raised beside and had been his best friend since the two of them could walk, had managed to fall in with a bunch of anarchic, thoughtless murderers.

As Connor reeled from the realization of what had happened to his friend, though, the female Assassin had no such shock to paralyze her.

"Kanen'to:kon," she demanded, "not that I am not grateful for your help, but why did you just stop us?"

Connor felt another wave of surprise at the woman's pronunciation of his friend's name. While still slightly accented, it was shockingly recognizable. Being able to say that; it pointed towards a sort of care that Connor had found to be extremely rare in colonist society, and he was surprised to feel a bit of jealousy. For Kanen'to:kon for finding someone who was that thoughtful, or because Connor had never been able to find someone like that other than his father and Master Johnson, he could not quite say.

"Because he was about to skewer you, Aveline," Kanen'to:kon replied, poking her in the chest in a familiar manner. Connor twisted his lips into a frown, an expression that was mirrored by the newly-named Aveline.

"Kanen'to:kon," she said slowly, a warning note in her voice. "Do not change the subject."

Nervously, Kanen'to:kon's hands dropped to his sides, fluttering. Glancing between the two of them, Connor could tell by the way his hands were twitching that he was barely keeping himself from tugging at his braids nervously. The sight of the old habit sent a bit of warmth through
Connor's chest, loosening the knot that had been tied in his gut.

How different could his friend be, really, if he still had those old habits?

"He...was...my friend," Kanen'ito:kon said, wilting underneath the woman's glare.

Very different. Connor swallowed, trying to ignore the pain in his chest at his former friend's words. Words filled his mouth, pressing against the back of his teeth and lips until they spilled out.

"Was? I am sorry, Kanen'ito:kon, but I was not aware that we had ended our friendship at any point," he said, letting his hurt colour his tone. "If you had some quarrel with me severe enough to damage our relationship I had rather hoped that you would at least send me some sort of message so that we could at least try to patch things up!"

Kanen'ito:kon's flexing fingers lost their battle and buried themselves in his braids, tugging at them and rubbing the hair between his fingers in an attempt to soothe the guilt that was as plain as day on his face. "I-I am sorry," he stammered, unable to look Connor in the eye, "I meant no harm -"

"No harm?" Connor said in disbelief. "We left the village as friends, we do not see each other for years and now that we have met again you deny our friendship without a word of explanation? How could that not harm?"

Distantly, Connor was aware that such a hysterical reaction was not becoming for a Templar Knight. But it was distant, and the closer parts of his mind was still in shock over his apparently former friend's words. Taking a step forward, he ignored how the woman tensed beside Kanen'ito:kon, keeping his gaze locked with Kanen'ito:kon's. "Please, if I have truly given you any offense tell me so that we come to an understanding! For whatever I have done to cause you to deny me, I apologize! I never meant to hurt you!"

"Ratonhnhake:ton," Kanen'ito:kon said, looking down at his fumbling hands, "I - it is difficult, to explain, but my cutting ties was not meant to hurt you, it was meant to help you -"

"What?" Connor said. He was so confused! What his friend was saying made no sense, it defied explanation. Cutting ties to help him - perhaps he thought that because they were apparently on opposite sides they would not be able to be friends anymore, but if that was the case why did he not just come to Connor and talk to him before he became so closely entwined with the Assassins? Did he perhaps not know?

Connor's eyes slid towards the woman named Aveline, who's hostility was warring with concern on her face. Could Kanen'ito:kon perhaps feel now that he was in too deep to get out? The Assassins were not gentle with those that they deemed traitors, he knew. Was that perhaps why he was not alone? Why there was another Assassin with him?

Aveline, however, did not allow Connor to try to silently communicate to Kanen'ito:kon with his eyebrows. Stepping in, she placed her hands over Kanen'ito:kon's in an intimate gesture that sent a pang of jealousy through Connor's heart.

"Kanen'ito:kon," she said, "look at me." Her fingers tightened around Kanen'ito:kon's as he did. "You do not owe anyone an explanation -"

"Pardon," Connor said, anger soothing his pain. He took a threatening step forward. "Not owing an explanation? You certainly were acting as if he owed you an explanation earlier -"

"This is not your business, Templar," she whirled and spat at him, "it is between the two of us and you are intruding -"
"Intruding? It is you who are intruding here between Kanen'to:kon and I -"

"STOP."

The two of them stopped and turned back to the man that they were arguing over. Kanen'to:kon's hands had dropped back to his sides and were now squeezed into fists. "The both of you," he continued, his voice quieter, "please stop. I did not mean to cause an argument between the two of you." Stepping forward, he placed a hand on Aveline's shoulder.

"Aveline," he said, "I do owe Ratonhnhake:ton an explanation; we were friends since we could walk and I haven't spoken to him in years."

Connor crossed his arms and felt a little smug until Kanen'to:kon turned to him. "And Ratonhnhake:ton," he said sternly. "Please do not act as if Aveline has no right to be here. She has been my closest companion since I left the village and she too has every right to request answers."

Connor ground his teeth together and narrowed his eyes at the woman. She was a neat figure, he admitted to himself sourly. Dressed in masculine colonist clothing and covered in weapons, she had a tricorn hat tilted at a rakish angle rather than the more usual peaked hood that Kanen'to:kon wore. He could see her training in the way that she held herself.

"Alright then," he muttered. "But I would still like an explanation as to why you are here." And why you are an Assassin, he thought to himself.

Kanen'to:kon sighed and rubbed his chin. "I am not sure how to put this..." he said slowly. "I am." The woman muscled her way between the two of them and tilted her chin arrogantly. "One of your brothers has been running around murdering people more than usual; the daughter of this family managed to survive and give us the story. So we are now looking for him so that we can end his little reign of terror out here."

Connor's hackles rose at her contemptuous tone. Even if what she was saying was true -

"Reign of terror?" he questioned, anger seeping into his voice. "Who are you to talk of reigns of terror; your Brotherhood -"

Kanen'to:kon placed a hand on both of their chests and pushed them apart, exasperation tingling the worry on his face. "The two of you - stop this. We are talking, not fighting." Turning towards Connor, he straightened himself. "But I am afraid that Aveline was telling the truth. We are here to stop one of your brothers - he was German, apparently from Hesse. He has been wreaking havoc all summer in the frontier; Miss Burke's story was the final tipping point for us getting involved."

German. From Hesse. Connor stiffened and clenched his jaw. He wanted to protest. To say that Miss Burke was mistaken, that no Templar could do such a thing. But he knew that that was not true. And hadn't his father spoken of rumours that von Statten was doing such things?

But why? Why would he do this? Tearing his gaze away from the two Assassins, he strode a few steps away, uncaring that he was exposing his back to them. Staring at the ash-covered wreck of what had recently been a cozy home, he covered his mouth. Even knowing of the stories, he had not truly believed that the man had been doing such things. What was von Statten getting from this? He thought furiously for something that would exonerate the man, something that he could use to explain the attacks to the two of them.

Damn that he was so uninvolved with the main war effort! If he was, than maybe he would know the German man better, but as it was his father had seen fit to continue to send him out to speak
with the different tribes that both sides had taken to speaking with to try and convince them to work with them and not the other side. He, in turn, had used every trick that he had learned from Uncle Johnson to alternately keep them from fighting or get them fighting as was needed, along with having more members join. His father had realized just how important the frontier was proving to be in the war and had accordingly changed their policies towards the natives, stepping up efforts to have them allied to the Templars and not the Assassins. Connor, being half-native and already having connections with various tribes, was the lynchpin for such activities and had been forced to stay out in the wilds non-stop with very few chances to return to colonist civilization. As such, he only knew what little he had been told by his father about the man, along with the few rumours that existed.

"Tell me, Templar," the woman drawled from behind him, "why so shocked? Have you been sleeping these past years? Were you born with your head buried in the sand?"

"Aveline -"

"Or do you simply not care? Are you only upset that your friend has been caught at his hobbies and now you have to clean up?"

"Aveline!"

The sharp tone from his usually pleasant-natured friend made Connor turn around. Kanen'to:kon, who had seemed so submissive and concerned with keeping the two of them happy, was now looming over his Assassin friend, looking upset and angry. The sheer change in nature had Connor blinking and looking at him with new eyes.

Kanen'to:kon's body had certainly changed from the slightly chubby young man that he had spent so much time with. Now, even with all of the layers of a traditional Assassin outfit on, Connor could see the bulky muscles that had been piled onto his frame shifting underneath the rough cloth. It was a compelling sight, one that brought back the young boy Connor had been those years before.

"Aveline," Kanen'to:kon growled, and oh yes, Connor was definitely feeling rather young right now, "stop. Sniping. I know that Miss Burke's story was disturbing. But no group is monolithic, and if you would just calm down for a few minutes and look at Ratonhnhake:ton, you would see that he does not condone these sorts of attacks."

The woman, to her credit, did not look intimidated. "Condone or not, he certainly has not done much to prevent that type of person from joining his Order," she snapped.

Connor glared at her. As if he could! He had only been made a knight a year ago, there was no way he would be able to question his father's hiring choices when he was so recently fully brought into the fold! Besides, it was rather rich for a member of an organization that stressed complete submission to the will of their leader to accuse him of being complicit in the hiring of monsters. ...Judging from the glares he was earning from both of the Assassins, he had said that last part out loud.

"You," the woman snapped, stalking forward, "have no right to question our Mentor's decisions -"

"No right?" bridled Connor, clenching his fists and meeting her gaze. "I am only one of those that have suffered due to your Mentor's decisions -"

"Oh no," she drawled, baring her teeth, "were you prevented from meeting your quota of
shakedowns one month? Did an Assassin get dirt on your nice red waistcoat?" She gestured contemptuously at his clothing.

Connor's side spasmed from where the Assassin had gutted him when he was fourteen. A red haze began to drop down over his eyes.

"You stupid -" he choked out, wishing that he could reach out and choke her. "Do you have any idea what the gangs and bandits your mentor supports do to the people around them? Or have you read one too many tales of Robin Hood and think that all criminals are just noble souls -"

"STOP. BOTH OF YOU. RIGHT NOW."

Kanen'to:kon glared at them both and crossed his arms, resembling a mother facing particularly naughty children. "Both of you are completely out of line!" he said. "Now stop it! We can not afford this right now. Ratonnhake:ton," he said, turning his head to address Connor, "I am assuming that you are here because even the Templar's do not approve of the Hessian's savagery. If that is the case, then the three of us have the same goal: taking him down. So rather than hunting him separately and getting in each other's way, why don't we work together to take him down with a temporary truce?"

Connor glared out of the side of his eye at the woman. His lip curled at the thought of working with such a woman, and by the look that she was shooting him she felt much the same way. However; however. It had been a long time since he had last seen Kanen'to:kon. And he could admit to himself, he was madly curious as to how his gentle friend fell in with such a pack of thugs and murderers.

"If I can trust her not to put a knife in my back the first time I turn away from her, than I agree to your terms," he said. Kanen'to:kon nodded at him, a look of relief quickly fluttering across his face. He turned back to the woman, who looked a little as if someone had put too much lemon in her tea.

"...Fine," she gritted out, keeping her eyes locked with Kanen'to:kon's. "But only so that I can watch your back for when the Templar betrays us, Kanen'to:kon."

What a wonderful start to an alliance.
Dinner was silent, the air filled with so much tension as Ratonhnhake:ton and Aveline glared at each other over their plates that Kanen'to:kon could barely choke down his share of the dried meat. He hadn't expected the two of them to be instant friends; especially not after Aveline's explosion earlier in the day. But he had rather hoped they would at least be able to stop glaring at each other long enough for him to digest his share of the food and bed down.

His hope was in vain. Swallowing down his last scraps, Kanen'to:kon did his best to ignore his roiling stomach and leaned forward, trying to drag their attention away from each other.

"So," he said, toying with the end of one of his braids, "Ratonhnhake:ton, you implied that you were tracking the Hessian back there as well. Would you like to share why?"

Internally, Kanen'to:kon winced as the words left his mouth. They sounded so patronizing! He wanted to re-connect with his friend, start saving him from the Templars; not insult him to the point that he left. Luckily, though, it appeared that Ratonhnhake:ton didn't mind. Licking his fingers clean of any lingering salt, he leaned forward as well, mimicking Kanen'to:kon's posture.

"I would like to tell you Kanen'to:kon," he said, his voice oddly smooth, "but first, I am afraid that I would like to learn what it is that dragged you and your friend out here first."

"We already told you," Aveline said, a veneer of calm barely hiding the roiling emotion in her voice, "the daughter of the family found us and requested our help."

Ratonhnhake:ton cocked his head in an oddly avian tick. "Humour me," he said. "Your answer will decide whether or not it is worth following through with this partnership."

"We already told you," Aveline said, a veneer of calm barely hiding the roiling emotion in her voice, "the daughter of the family found us and requested our help."

Aveline's lip curled. "How very kind of you," she said.

Kanen'to:kon decided to start talking before another fight could break out.

"We found Miss Burke about two weeks ago when she stumbled out of the forest," he said quietly. "She was covered in burns and bruises, and she had a bad fever."

"She looked like someone had tried to beat her to death," muttered Aveline, savagely chewing on a lingering piece of meat. "Which they did."

Kanan put a hand on her thigh and shot her a warning look before continuing.

"It took a while, but once she had recovered enough to speak of what happened, she told us of the man who had attacked her and killed her family. Aveline in particular was deeply touched," he said, looking at her and giving her thigh a squeeze. "She already knew of the Hessian; he has killed dozens of Assassins already in the time that he has been here in the colonies. With this attack and rumours of others, though, it was decided by our mentor that the man had to die as a soon as possible. Aveline and I were chosen to do so. We traveled here as it was the last place that we knew he was for sure, saw you and -" Kanen'to:kon shrugged. "You know the rest."

Ratonhnhake:ton had pressed his lips together into a tight grim line as Kanen'to:kon had spoken. His brow furrowed underneath the brim of his hat, he looked deeply troubled. Picking up a stick from beside him, he gave the fire they were sitting around a poke.

"That does sound similar to what I was told of the man's actions before I left," he finally admitted,
sounding like the words could barely bring themselves to leave his mouth. Kanan immediately glanced over at Aveline, ready to intervene, but all she did was quirk an eyebrow and go back to nibbling on her food.

"This is unusual to you, then?" Kanen'to:kon asked.

Connor shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "Violent men - they can have their uses, but my fa - the Grandmaster does not usually allow such unrestrained violence. He says that it causes ill will."

As opposed to it being morally wrong, Kanen'to:kon thought, biting the inside of his mouth.

"He had heard some - disturbing rumours," Ratonhnhake:ton said, tapping his fingers together nervously, "so I was sent out to investigate them."

"So now what, then?" Aveline asked, not looking up from her food.

Ratonhnhake:ton looked pensive and slightly sad. "I suppose," he said slowly, "that it is now my duty to hunt him down and kill him before he further damages the Order."

Silence fell over them again. What did one say to that, Kanen'to:kon wondered. He had seen the ring on his friend's hand when he had taken his gloves off to eat, but his mention of the Templar Grandmaster was what really brought things home to him. His friend was a Templar. He had allied with those that would see their people slaughtered and enslaved.

No! No. Kanen'to:kon gave his head a mental shake. Not his friend. His friend had not allied with such people. Remembering Aveline's story that she had told when they had first met, Kanen'to:kon tried to subtly look at Ratonhnhake:ton's eyes. She had later recalled having a golden sheen to her eyes when she was under her step-mother's control; if Kanen'to:kon saw the same sheen in Ratonhnhake:ton's eyes, then perhaps -

But Ratonhnhake:ton didn't look at him. Instead, he stood up, still looking troubled.

"Please excuse me," he said softly. "I am afraid that I must answer nature's call. I will be back in a moment."

Watching him walk away, Kanen'to:kon bit the inside of his cheek and nearly rose to go after him when Aveline's fingers suddenly dug into his hand, which was still on her thigh. Turning, he saw that she was looking at him oddly.

"Kanen'to:kon," she said, softly so that he had to bend forward to hear her, "what are you doing?"

Kanen'to:kon looked at her, puzzled. "Doing what?" he asked.

"This." Aveline raised her eyebrows and jerked her head in the direction that Ratonhnhake:ton had disappeared. "Why be so nice to a Templar? I know that he was your friend, but why stop us from fighting? Why offer an alliance? You have to know that the Mentor will not be happy with such a thing."

Kanen'to:kon swallowed and looked away. He didn't want to talk about this; how could he talk about something he felt more than thought? But with the way Aveline's eyes were burning into his back, he knew that he would get no rest until he tried.

"He is my friend," he began, slow and halting. "My closest, when we were growing up. And it was the same for him. And I can not believe that that person that I grew up with would embrace Templar values so whole-heartedly."
"People change, Kanen'to:kon."

"Not Ratonhnhake:ton." He turned back to look at her and gestured expansively. "The Ratonhnhake:ton I know had nothing but respect and love for others. All he wanted was for everyone, Kanienke'ha:ka and settler alike, to live together in peace. To hear that he has turned his back on all of that, that he willingly works with those who would degrade us and see us as nothing more than animals." Kanen'to:kon stopped, groping the air helplessly like it would help him find the words to describe such a change in his old friend. Words rose up in his throat until it felt like they would spill out like vomit. "It defies logic! It defies everything I know about him!"

"But he is helping them, Kanen'to:kon," Aveline said, leaning forward. "He is a Templar; you saw the ring on his hand, you heard him speak. He believes in what he is saying -"

"Not necessarily!" Kanen'to:kon plunked himself back down onto the ground where they had been sitting and clasped her smaller brown hands between his own great paws. "He could be being forced to say it!"

Aveline stared at him, confusion written plainly across his features. "Kanen'to:kon," she said, "you aren't making any sense."

"Your story! Do you remember, Aveline? What you told us that night, about what your step-mother did to you?"

Wrinkling her nose, Aveline scowled and began to pull away. "Of course I do!" she snapped. "I lived it, remember?"

Kanen'to:kon winced and squeezed her hands in apology. "I am sorry," he said, "I did not mean to give offense. It is just, when you shared your tale, the part where your step-mother took control of your actions and words with that strange artifact - I remembered that when I saw Ratonhnhake:ton in Boston. And it occured to me, if such a thing could happen once, it could possibly happen again."

Understanding crossed Aveline's face. "You think that what happened to me is currently happening to Ratonhnhake:ton."

Kanen'to:kon nodded furiously.

She bit her full lower lip and looked doubtful. "Kanen'to:kon," she said carefully, "remember, L'Isle had to renew her control over me every night. We are a long ways away from town and Ratonhnhake:ton came alone."

"So maybe his handlers are better at using the Apple." Kanen'to:kon shrugged.

"Kanen'to:kon," Aveline said. She stopped when she saw the look on his face and sighed. Slipping a hand out from between his, she gently patted his hand. "I understand why you believe such a theory," she said quietly, a hint of sadness in her voice. "But please, don't fall apart on me if it turns out that you are wrong."

Kanen'to:kon pressed his lips together, but was saved from saying anything in reply by Ratonhnhake:ton returning. Sitting down, he scratched at his cheek, looking uncomfortable.

"Tell me," he said after a long pause, "what happened to the daughter after she told you of the Hessian?"

Beside him, Aveline tensed and squeezed the pattern for 'silence' into Kanen'to:kon's palm.
Kanen'to:kon, however, chose to ignore it.

"She was still recovering when we left," he said slowly. "She took severe injuries in the Hessian's attack. The man choked and beat her savagely, and she was still inside when her home was set on fire." There, in Ratonhnhake:ton's eyes, there was a flash of horror and paralyzing fear. Clearly, he was remembering his own experience of coming back to the village only to find his home burning. It was warped, but Kanen'to:kon could not help but feel a flash of relief. His friend was still in there. "The Mentor decided that he would have her stay with another family once she recovered, in deference to the services that her family did for us."

Ratonhnhake:ton's face was still tight, but there was relief in the shadows of his eyes. Bowing his head, he placed one hand over the other and squeezed it tightly. "I am glad to hear that she is doing well," he said.

And just like that, Aveline was set off again. Kanen'to:kon could feel her swell up with rage beside him, and knew that he would not be able to stop her tirade this time.

"Well?" she said, her voice promising a knife in the dark. "Well? Her family is gone, dead at the hands of your precious Order, and you think that her being alive counts as being well?"

Kanen'to:kon could see Ratonhnhake:ton's chin rounding out into a familiar stubborn curve and wanted to place his face in his hands. This was not how he wanted the two people he loved most in the world to interact.

"Not at the hands of the Order," the other native growled, squeezing his hands now in anger rather than regret. "Von Statten was not working under the orders of our Grandmaster when he attacked the Burkes."

"And yet, you said earlier that your Grandmaster was so very comfortable with the Hessian acting in such a way; he knew what he was hiring."

"No." The word fell from Ratonhnhake:ton's lips like a boulder falling off a cliff. "The Grandmaster did not know that von Statten was a rabid animal wearing a human pelt. He knew that he was a mercenary from Europe who came highly recommended from the Continental Rite."

"Oh, because they are such bastions of righteousness."

"And you Assassins are, even when all you do is kill and kill whereas we at least have some solutions that do not involve murdering everyone in sight."

"Everyone? Hardly! We do not kill the innocent, something that you can not claim."

"And who decides who counts as innocent? A guardsman could be innocent, only working to put bread on the table for his family."

"Enough!" snapped Kanen'to:kon. Jumping to his feet, he towered over them as if he could intimidate them into no longer arguing. "We should not be arguing like this! We have the same enemy and we all agree on his fate! Now," he growled, "the Mentor warned us that the Hessian is a difficult opponent. Having two parties after him could easily end with us tripping over each other and getting someone other than that beast killed. That is why I suggested that rather than working at cross-purposes, we call a truce and pool our resources. But if we cannot put aside our respective problems with each other, we will only do our enemy's work for him! So I am asking the both of you now, are you truly willing to act professionally and put things aside or shall we put a stop to this alliance before it is fully born?"
Ratonhnhake:ton was looking up at him, his brown eyes wide and his lips slightly parted, staring at Kanen'to:kon as if he had never seen him before. Aveline, however, looked far less star-struck. Her lips were pressed together and her hazel eyes looked towards Ratonhnhake:ton, narrowing until they were nearly slits. Her nostrils flared, and she let out an annoyed-sounding puff of air. But eventually, her sense won out.

Looking away from Ratonhnhake:ton, she took in a deep breath, visibly composing herself. "I," she said, "will always have your back, Kanen'to:kon. No matter what." But her eyes flicked up to him pleadingly, and Kanen'to:kon knew that she was begging him not to betray her trust in him. Swallowing, he looked towards Ratonhnhake:ton, not trusting himself to properly answer; because he knew that right now he was not being a very good Assassin.

Sometimes he couldn't help but think that he had never been a very good Assassin, because looking at the grown-up face of his oldest friend, he was not thinking of the Creed, his Mentor, or even his mission. All he was thinking of was that he did not want to have to fight his friend. He did not want to be the one to spill his blood on the snow on some distant date, their friendship long-forgotten in the face of the yawning gulf of the Templar-Assassin war.

(He did not want to be wrong about the Pieces of Eden and his first love's culpability in the Templar Order's crimes, his mind, the truthful bastard, whispered.)

But to his relief, his friend nodded as well. He looked about as happy as Aveline did about it, but he nodded. "I will do my very best to see this alliance succeed," he murmured, "and to see von Statten punished for his crimes."

Aveline murmured similar sentiments, and with a great deal of relief Kanen'to:kon let himself drop back onto his now-chilled seat.

"Thank you, both of you," he said sincerely. "Now that it has been decided, shall we get to actually planning how we are going to take the beast down?"

Aveline shifted in her seat and leaned forward to speak. Her unhappiness and anger was wiped off of her face, replaced with the pure professionalism and distance that the Assassins demanded whenever on a mission.

"We managed to track the Hessian here before the trail went cold," she said, her words short but not quite clipped. "Before you arrived," she said, nodding towards Ratonhnhake:ton, "we were discussing on how to go on from here in the hunt. We thought that there might have been witnesses from Miss Burke's escape, and were planning on questioning members of the nearby hunting lodge for information on where the man would be likely to go; which paths were easiest to follow, which lead to another town, and other factors."

Ratonhnhake:ton hummed and leaned forward, mimicking Aveline's posture. "That is a good start," he said, "but it would also undoubtedly take several days, if not weeks, to gather information from such sources with any amount of certainty. Do you have any operatives in the area that you could talk to?"

Aveline grimaced, and Kanen'to:kon copied her expression. "No," he interjected. "This area is too remote for there to be a reason to station anyone here permanently. Mister Burke served that purpose well enough before his death that the Mentor did not see a point in doing so."

Ratonhnhake:ton hummed again and straightened, reaching behind him. Grabbing his pack, he plopped it down in front of him and pulled out a folded piece of paper after a bit of rummaging. Unfolding it, he shifted so that the two of them could see what was written on its surface.
It was a map, much to Kanen'to:kon's surprise. He had not thought that the area was densely populated enough to warrant any interest from the Templar Order, let alone a normal surveyor. It was not the most fancy map, certainly nothing like the one Mistress Scott had of Boston that she liked to bring out when they had been planning out missions in the city. That one had been done in an experienced hand, delicately shaded with coloured inks to better evoke the actual composition of the land. This one was comparatively crude, its thick lines carefully drawn by what had undoubtedly been an amateur hand. But it was far more than anything Kanen'to:kon or Aveline had been able to acquire, and so Kanen'to:kon was not ashamed of leaning forward further to better memorize the simple patterns of ink that had been scratched onto the paper's surface.

"We are here," Ratonhnhake:ton said, pointing to a part of the map surrounded with crude overlapping arrowheads that represented trees. "There is a town nearby, just a little to the east, that is near a fort with a Templar commander. If I can make contact with the Templar's there, they may have a better idea as to where von Statten went."

"Why?"

Ratonhnhake:ton didn't blink at Aveline's question. Most likely because it sounded sincerely curious rather than confrontational.

"Von Statten is a European mercenary and soldier, not an American frontiersman. He would have to eventually go to a town for supplies, and this is the nearest one. Any supplies that he would have been able to get from here would not last long or be easy to carry."

Kanen'to:kon frowned. "That is a Templar town, though."

"It was only recently that I was sent out to investigate him. The garrison there would not -"

"No," Kanen'to:kon said, raising his hand to stop his friend, "that is not what I mean. What I mean is that Aveline and I are Assassins. How do you expect us to get in and out of there without being identified?"

Ratonhnhake:ton hesitated, busying his hands with re-folding the map. "Well," he said, "I suppose that we could find you a change of clothes."

"And all that we would be doing is waiting around as you talk to your allies," Aveline interjected. Again, though, her tone was not accusatory. "Even if we changed clothes, I do not think that it would be easy to keep from attracting attention if we rode in with you. It sounds dangerous."

Ratonhnhake:ton frowned. "If that is the case then, you could wait outside of it," he said, sounding reluctant. His eyes sliding over to Kanen'to:kon, he added, "It would most likely be uncomfortable, though, especially with a warm bed being so close."

Kanen'to:kon shrugged, a little touched by his apparent concern. "We are Assassins," he said simply. "We are used to pain, let alone discomfort."

Ratonhnhake:ton's lips twitched, tugging downward. "In that case," he said, "I could most likely be in and out of the town in a day. I have a missive from the Grandmaster demanding that every Templar I ask help me in my search, so I could easily resupply as well while I am there. Would you like me to get some supplies for you as well?"

Caught off guard, Kanen'to:kon could not think of anything, so he simply shrugged. "I cannot think of anything right now, but I am certain I will think of something in the morning," he said. "For now, though, that seems to be a workable starting point. Shall we bed down for the evening?"
Connor pulled his cape around his shoulders a little tighter as he urged Akweks through the frosted-over leaves. The wind was whipping through the trees that surrounded him and savagely gnawing at any exposed flesh that it could find. He was almost envious of Kanen and the female Assassin; rather than riding through the frigid woods, they were secreted away in the old hunting lodge, warming their hands by the fire.

Up ahead, though, reassuringly close, was the small village that had been marked on the map. Springing up around the stone fort that had been built there during the Seven Year's War, it was a ramshackle group of buildings that were practically built on top of each other, all the better that they were close to the bored soldiers that made up the bulk of the population. Stores that sold weapons and alcohol were closest to the fort's stone walls, having pushed out the actual houses that people lived in to the 'outskirts', and it was the main inn, called "The Tamed Wolf", that Connor was heading for.

As he entered the huddled shacks that ringed the town and fort, he was careful to sit up straight and look ahead. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see the movement of the houses' inhabitants; small figures, most likely the neglected children of liaisons between the soldiers and the townspeople's wives looking for an easy mark to steal from. Normally, Connor would do his best to 'accidently' drop a few coins as he both entered and left, knowing that it would likely be the only kindness the children would see for much of their short, brutal lives. This time, though, he couldn't afford to. He would need all of the money in the pouches he had hidden on his person to loosen tongues if he was to have any hope of finding von Statten.

He couldn't keep guilt from twisting through his gut, though. Even just peering out of the corner of his eye, he could see how thin the children's rag-clad arms and legs were. Thanks to his village and his father, Connor had never had to go hungry for any real length of time, but he still felt empathy for those who were not so lucky.

*Keep your eyes ahead,* he warned himself. *You don't have time for this.*

Still, it was a relief to enter the warm and crowded inn, away from the children's empty, hopeless eyes. Scanning the crowd that had managed to squeeze itself into the small wooden building, Connor was immediately able to pick out several small, subtle hat and belt decorations that signified their wearer's allegiance to the Templar Order.

Connor didn't head over to them right away, though. Instead, he casually began to weave his way through the crowd towards the bar. His father's voice, echoing through his head, warned him about going directly towards informants in a public place. One never knows who is watching, his warm voice murmured in Connor's memory; even if he was sure that he had not been followed, it would never hurt to act as if he had.

So once he had managed to get the barkeep's attention and order a drink, he leaned against the scratched-up bar with his shoulders around his ears and began to take small, careful sips of his ale, looking as if he was simply another traveller coming in to warm up from the cold. Slowly, as if his fingers were far stiffer than they actually were, he took his gloves off and tucked them into his belt before rubbing them together as if to warm them. While doing this, he 'accidently' shifted the silver and ruby ring so that the large main cross was facing inwards towards his palm, leaving only the
smaller crosses visible. Lazily, he tucked a strand of hair behind his ear, careful to allow his just a
glimmer of his ring to be seen. There. That would let anyone who had hot information for the Order
know that he was looking for it.

Going back to sipping at his truly foul ale, Connor was soon joined at the bar by another. As the
black-clad figure casually slipped between him and the carpenter on his left side, Connor glanced
out of the corner of his eye, trying to see if this new person was associated with the Order or just
another tradesman looking for another drink.

Ah, there! On the splayed-wide hand pressed against the counter-top, a silver ring much like his
own, except made of iron and coloured glass, shone from the man's finger.

"Have I met your expectations, Master Connor?" came the warm, Spanish-accented voice of the
hand's owner.

Immediately, Connor's eyes flicked up to confirm what his ears had heard.

Father Federico Perez smiled kindly at him, his face as scarred as ever. Immediately, a flood of
memories washed through his skull. Perez, being his languages tutor when he was younger, had
been a familiar figure in the Kenway household for much of Connor's early life, only returning to
his once the priest had proclaimed him to be capable of sounding like a native in Spanish, French
and Latin. Even afterwards, though, Connor had seen him semi-regularly as he visited his father for
assignments. The man had always seemed to have time for Connor, often making a point of staying
long enough to converse with him in one of the other languages to make sure that his skills were
still sharp. Connor could still remember the warm feeling that had spread through him each and
every single time the man had smiled at him, praising his knack with languages in a non-
patronizing way that none of his other tutors in other subjects had ever quite managed.

So Connor smiled back at the man, sincerely glad to see a friendly face so far from home.

"Father Perez," he said, "you have met and exceeded them." Straightening, he turned so that he was
better facing the Spanish priest before leaning back against the bar with an elbow. "I did not realize
that you were assigned this far out. I thought that the Grandmaster preferred to keep you in the
cities more."

"Bah," Perez said, making a flapping hand gesture to dismiss Connor's words. "He knows that I am
welcome everywhere. This far out, everyone is a Catholic on their deathbed. Or a Protestant, or a
Lutheran. It rather depends on what type of priest is closest."

Connor chuckled. "That certainly is true," he said. "Even in the cities."

"But enough about me," Perez said, mimicking Connor's slanted pose. "I saw your signal. I have
been around this area for the past three months, ministering. What do you need to know?"

All of the amusement Connor had been feeling quickly drained from him. "I need to know if you
have seen von Statten," he said, keeping his voice low. "The Grandmaster has heard some
disturbing rumours lately about his behaviour -"

"The Burkes." Perez looked equally unamused, but for different reasons. "They ran information to
the Assassins."

"And to us," Connor reminded him. "They had a niche and they filled it well. There was never any
sign that they favoured one side over the other."

Perez frowned. Normally, Connor would have agreed with him, uncomfortable with having a
source that so openly played both sides. The scar on his stomach gave a small sharp pain. But from what he had learned of their fates - no one deserved such a thing to happen to them, and Connor told Perez as much.

His frown, if anything, seemed to deepen. "Master Connor," he said reproachfully, "I am sure that you are unaware of this, but Assassins have been spotted in the forest around that area recently. Who is to say that they did not finally get sick of the Burke's two-timing ways and decided to silence them?"

Connor opened his mouth to rebutt the priest before closing it with a sharp click. He didn't, he realized with a faint sense of horror. He could not say that with absolute certainty. It was just that he heard the story first from Kanen, and so had immediately trusted him. Was he allowing his fondness -

No. No.

Kanen would not do that. Nor would Kanen associate with people who would do that. Connor's mind churned with memories of the sweet young man that had been his friend for as long as he could remember. Someone like Kanen, who had been the last to kill his first hunting trophy, being capable of the savagery that Connor had seen at that burnt-out shell of a cabin was simply impossible.

"No," Connor said, proud of how steady his voice was. "No, what I saw at the cabin was not in the style of the Assassins. They prefer a more directed strike - they would not have attacked the children as well." A thought occured to him. "Is the news of the Assassins why you have been staying here?" he asked, suddenly curious. "I only ask because I know you prefer to winter in the city -"

But Perez was nodding. Connor felt his heart sink. Perez was a fanatical Templar, believing the Assassins to be evil in a way that Connor knew disturbed some of the more moderate members of the Order, his father included. If he was in the area, that would make his truce with Kanen and the female Assassin that much more difficult to stand by -

"Ah, but the General," Perez bemoaned, "he does not see reason. He refuses to let me go and purge those sinners from this world, saying that I must stay while things are so unsettled out here."

Connor blinked. The General? The only general in the colonies that he knew of that was part of the Order was -

"General Davenport is here?" Connor asked curiously, subtly steering the man away from his irritation at being leashed.

Perez nodded. "He is in charge of this fort over the winter," he said. "So long as he keeps it, the Americans will be unable to bring supplies in overland." He cocked his head to one side. "Your father also wants to know more about the raiders out here."

Connor tightened his lips. "I assume that that is what the General wants you for, then?" he asked.

Perez nodded. "In fact, I am supposed to see him tonight," he said. "If you would like, I could bring you up with me to speak with him. I am sure that he would be able to give you more help than I could."

But Connor had begun to shake his head as soon as the words crossed the priests lips. "No, no," he said. "I need to move quickly and quietly. Soldiers would simply slow me down."
"Then I am sorry that I could not give you more help, my friend," Perez said, clapping a hand on Connor's shoulder. "I will keep you in my prayers."

Connor ducked his head in acknowledgement and watched the priest walk off, an odd feeling churning in his stomach. Father Perez's words had shaken him, despite his best efforts. Connor knew Kanen, yes, but he did not know the other Assassin with him. And she certainly seemed to have quite a bit of influence over him.

Could the woman be corrupting or controlling Kanen? He had seemed to be much the same person, but...

Thankfully, he was quickly dragged out of these thoughts by another hand clapping him on the back. Tensing and looking over his shoulder, Connor did not recognize the person behind him for a moment. Dressed in a corporal's uniform, with a slim form, the young man with a solemn face seemed quite unfamiliar. Just as Connor was about to open his mouth and say something to that effect, though, the person smirked at him, and recognition flooded in.

"Eleanor Mallow," he murmured, mindful of the nearby soldiers roaring with laughter over some drunken tale.

If anything, her smirk just grew bigger. Subtly jerking her head towards the door, she let go of his shoulder and began to shove her way through the crowd. Hastily, Connor set his mug back down and tossed a coin at the bartender before following her out.

Outside in the crisp night air, everything seemed clearer, his worries easily washing away like dust in a bath. Kanen and the Assassin woman receded in his mind, fading like the stars in the face of the rising sun.

"I thought you might be along," Eleanor said, leaning against the wall beside the inn door and pitching her voice low and rough. "Ever since the news about the Burkes reached us, the General and I thought that the Grandmaster would send someone."

"And who better than me, hmm?" Connor said, spreading his arms. A smile wormed its way onto his face. "It is good to see you again, Eleanor."

"It's Elijah out here," Eleanor said. "But the same to you, nonetheless. Sorry that I didn't come over to you right away, though. I was stuck with some drunken louts playing cards."

"Well, I hope you won your hand, then."

A white slash of a smirk carved itself across the lower half of her face. With her hair tucked up underneath her hat and her breasts bound flat underneath the layers of her uniform, she looked nothing more than like a slim young man, barely old enough to have enlisted. Connor couldn't help but wonder how many heads she had had to break before she was accepted by the other men stationed here.

"That hand and more," she said, patting the purse hanging from her belt. "But that's not what we're out here for. I assume you want information on Von Statten, then?"

Connor shifted back into his more professional mindset. Crossing his arms, he nodded grimly. "I take it that you do not need to be filled in on his actions in the frontier, then?"

Eleanor mimicked his posture, her smile fading. "No. Word travels fast through us soldiers. Everyone knows of what happened to the Burkes, in varying amounts of detail. So far the General's kept it relatively quiet that von Statten's the one responsible, but that won't last for much longer."
"How long was he here, then?"

"Not very," Eleanor said, shaking her head. "He just appeared out of the woods one day, asking to see the General. My father refused though; thought that there was something fishy going on, since he hadn't been warned by the Grandmaster that von Statten would be arriving soon or heard any whispers to that effect. He'd also heard the rumours of his activities out here." She shrugged. "So mostly the Hessian just hung around in the inn, drinking and talking to strange people."

"Strange people?"

A tiny bit of discomfort entered her face. "Not...strange in their clothes or manners," she said slowly, shifting from one foot to the other. "Rather, strange in their words. Because the General was suspicious of him, I was sent to follow the man around," she explained. "For a while, he did not do anything strange, but then he began to speak oddly with some men that came in. The words - they almost sounded like something that I had heard before, a long time ago. About submission to a higher will. And believe me, it did not sound like they were talking about God."

Connor frowned, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Like Eleanor, those words stirred something in him, like they were heard long ago. But even as he tried to quickly root through his own memories, the feeling began to disappear, like water running out of his cupped hands. Shaking his head, he dismissed it. Whether or not he had heard it before did not matter now. All that mattered was figuring out where von Statten was.

"Did the men do anything?" he asked. "Did Von Statten hand anything over to them, a small package or somesuch?"

Eleanor shook her head. "No," she said, "though at one point it did sound as if one of the men were trying to convince him to do something like that. Sounded like he refused, though. He was saying something about it being too risky here. After that, they began to talk about meeting up someplace else. I wasn't able to get close enough to hear clearly, but they were saying something that sounded awful similar to Fort William Henry."

Connor blinked. "That is not too far from here," he noted. "Barely more than a day or two's ride."

"Not much shelter there, though," Eleanor reminded him. "What with how the French destroyed it before retreating."

"Still," Connor noted. "That is far more information than I had before talking to you. Thank you."

Turning to leave, he was stopped by a hand touching his shoulder. Turning, he looked back at an oddly serious Eleanor. It was a look that he had rarely seen on her face.

"Connor," she said, her voice lightening to its more familiar tone. "About you going after von Statten. Are you going alone?"

Ah. So that was what this was about. His father's words of warning about the Hessian echoed through Connor's head. It seemed that he had not been the only person to be warned about Von Statten's savagery.

Laying his hand over Eleanor's, he tried to sound comforting.

"I am not going to try and take Von Statten down myself," he said, "I am just going to go scout out the area and make sure that he is actually there. Once I have confirmed that, I will come back and request more help." His gut twinged slightly at the lie. But what was he supposed to do? Assure Eleanor that he had two Assassins watching his back, one of which he was not entirely sure
wouldn't stab him in the back the moment the opportunity presented itself?

No. He needed to do this alone, with just Kanen and his partner. Once they came back, he would report that he either lucked out or that an accident had taken care of Von Statten for him.

Looking into Eleanor's eyes, he tried to project honesty. "I am not the sort to take risks, Elea-Elijah," he stumbled over the unfamiliar name.

She snorted skeptically.

"I am!" he insisted, a little insulted. "All of those other times were just when things spun out of control."

"Yes, well," Eleanor said, slipping her hand out from under his, "that's what life does, Connor. Nothing goes to plan."

"This one will," he assured her. "Is there anything else?"

She sucked on her lower lip for a moment. "Yeah," she said. "Assassins have been seen crawling around the area. If you're going alone, keep your wits about you."

"Do not worry," he assured her. "Father Perez already warned me about them. I will." And he definitely would. He trusted Kanen. He didn't trust his partner.

But Eleanor did not look all that relieved. She looked away from him, turning to stare at the frosted-over ground and chew on the inside of her cheek. A chill slowly crawled down Connor's back.

She was hiding something.

"Elijah," he asked, hesitant to push her too far. "Is there something else that you are not telling me?"

"...You know those strange men that Von Statten was talking to?" she asked, still not looking him in the eye. "Well, he also talked to Father Perez as well before leaving. A lot."

Chapter End Notes

And I'm throwing in a little bit of foreshadowing into this chapter. As ever, let me know what you guys think in the comments!
Hunting Hessians Part 5

Kanen'to:kon was not sure about how he felt about the current situation. On one hand, Ratonhnhake:ton and Aveline had stopped arguing, which was good. On the other hand, they had stopped arguing, which was bad. Honestly, with the icy silence currently shrouding the group, Kanen'to:kon would have preferred a good roaring argument. He would have felt less awkward as they marched along, the ground lightly dusted with snow.

Softly sighing, he turned his head slightly to look at the river that they were following. Its current, rapid as it was, was already slowing under the ice that was forming on top of it preparation for winter. Aveline had pointed it out earlier, getting an unimpressed grunt from Ratonhnhake:ton. He had noted that he too had seen the change in seasons, Aveline had made a snide comment about Ratonhnhake:ton seeing it but perhaps being unwilling to admit that it was frozen, and then both of them had drawn knives and it would have ended in blood if Kanen'to:kon was not there.

Honestly. The two of them were acting like small children more than the grown and dangerous adults that Kanen'to:kon knew them to be.

In any case, he had finally gotten a promise out of the both of them to not speak unless they had something pleasant or life-saving to say for the rest of the way to the old fort, and so far they had stuck to it. Kanen'to:kon just wished that it didn't mean that the entire journey would take place in utter silence.

The frosty ground crunched underneath their feet as they trudged along in utter silence, their breath misting in the air. Even with his hood up, Kanen'to:kon could feel the wind nipping at his face, and glancing back, he could see Ratonhnhake:ton shiver and burrow deeper into his coat. Already, his ears were red from the cold.

Aveline's cheeks were a similar shade. Sniffing slightly (her nose always ran on cold days; she hated that it did and used it as an excuse to hog the blankets at night), she gave a quick cough to clear her throat before asking,

"Where was this fort, again?"

Ratonhnhake:ton grunted from within his scarf.

"Nearby."

Thankfully, Aveline did not comment on this further. Instead, she turned her head forward again, looking as if she was mulling something over. "I see," she said. "If that is the case, then, may I suggest that we stop soon for a meal?"

Kanen'to:kon's stomach grumbled in reply. If his face had not already been red from the cold, he was sure that it would have been scarlet from his embarassment.

"I agree," he said hastily. Turning his head, he called over his shoulder to Ratonhnhake:ton. "We are going to stop for food, Ratonhnhake:ton."

They ended up settling down in the shadow of a particularly large rock by the river, smaller pebbles digging into their backsides as they chewed. The meal did not take long, all of them being accustomed to eating on the road, and soon enough, they were packing up again when something twinged below Kanen'to:kon's belly button.
Pausing mid-adjustment to his horse's packs, he frowned. Mentally checking, he realized that yes, that pressure down there was real. Quickly finishing rebalancing the packs, he turned to the others.

"Pardon me," he said quietly, "I will be back momentarily." The two of them nodded, but from the way their eyes slid towards each other, Kanen'to:kon had the feeling that he would probably want to hurry his business along.

Slipping into the woods, the leaves crunching underneath his feet, he began to scan the forest for a good place to relieve himself. While going against a tree was always an option, the ones that grew along the riverside were mostly young birch trees, far too thin to hide him. It was perhaps a bit odd, but Kanen'to:kon had never liked relieving himself when there was a possibility of others seeing him; he just couldn't relax enough. Usually this was not a problem, the forests being thick enough with plants that he did not have to go too far into the woods. But with it being late autumn, there was precious little bush to help hide him now, and he found himself hiking further and further away from his two friends.

Finally, though, he saw a gathering of low bushes up ahead. Even leafless, their branches were close enough together to cover him up. Thankful, he hurried forward, already unbuckling his belt. He was in such a hurry that he nearly tripped over the first body.

Stumbling, his hands tangled in his belt, he nearly fell on the forest floor before managing to catch himself and regain his balance. He then nearly fell over again as he frantically scrambled away from the first body, and then the second, and third, and so on as his eyes drank in the sight of the clearing.

Men, dressed roughly as if they were hunters, lay dead on the forest floor, their sightless eyes staring up at the clouded-over sky with gentle, beatific smiles on their faces and not a mark of violence on them.

Kanen'to:kon swallowed, his knees wavering. Part of him wanted to run away. Those smiles, the lack of violence; there was something just plain wrong with how these men had died. It made the animal that lived in the back of his mind whine and whimper. But the rest of him, the analytical part that had been nurtured by the Assassins, knew that something so strange so close to one's target warranted an investigation. So squeezing his eyes shut and swallowing convulsively, Kanen'to:kon steeled himself.

Opening his eyes and suppressing his panic, he began to break down the scene in front of himself.

Eight men lay dead in front of him with nothing to show why. Staring up at the sky, their bodies were arranged oddly in the middle of the churned up leaves in a strange pattern. Six of the men lay in a circle, their feet pointing inwards towards each other. Each of them were wearing the same rough frontiersman clothing, their arms crossed over their chests and their usual weapons missing. Two more men lay on the ground in the same manner outside of the circle. One lay head to head with one of the circle's men, and the last lay over his knees.

They had been purposefully put there, that much was clear. Men did not just die like that, in such a clear pattern. But why? Why that pattern? Why them? They did not look like anyone special.

Caught up in his examination, Kanen'to:kon did not hear the other two coming towards them until one of the horses whinnied. Jerking up from where he had fallen into a crouch, he turned to look at them.

But they were not looking at him.
"What is that?" Ratonhnhake:ton asked, his eyes wide.

"Dead bodies," Aveline replied, but there was no heat to her tone. Her eyes too were wide, exposing the whites around them.

It said something about just how disturbing the sight was that Ratonhnhake:ton didn't reply to her words. Instead, letting his horse's reigns fall from his hands, he began to take shaky steps towards the bodies. "These men," he murmured to himself, ignoring Kanen'to:kon. "How did they die? There is no mark upon them and yet they look to be recently dead."

Looking at Aveline, Kanen'to:kon saw that her lips were pressed together until they were pale and bloodless. Reaching out, he gently took her hand between both of his and squeezed it reassuringly.

"I've seen this," she whispered as he leaned closer to verbally reassure her. Stopping just as he opened his mouth, he blinked in confusion.

"What?"

"I've seen this before," she said louder, tearing her gaze away from the bodies to stare at him desperately. "With my stepmother."

For a moment, Kanen'to:kon didn't understand what she was saying. Then his stomach dropped as her words hit him full force.

Her stepmother; Madelein D'Isle. Grandmaster of the French Colonial Templars. And owner of -

"An Apple of Eden did this?" he said, horror suffusing his body. He knew that it was a powerful item, but to cause death without leaving a mark? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ratonhnhake:ton stiffen.

So did Aveline. And Kanen'to:kon could see the connection being made in her mind.

"You knew," she growled, her uncertainty and fear fleeing her face. "You knew that there was an Apple involved."

Kanen'to:kon whipped his head around just in time to see his friend looking away, ashamed.

"I -"

"You knew!" Aveline snapped, pulling away from Kanen'to:kon's hands. "You knew and you did not tell us!"

Just like that, the shame fell away from Ratonhnhake:ton's frame at her tone. Turning, he glared at her, all resemblance to the boy Kanen'to:kon knew falling away.

"Well as you have been reminding me at every turn, we may be working together but we are still enemies!" he snapped. "I am a Templar, you two are Assassins! Would you have told me that there was an Apple involved if you knew?"

"Yes!" The words burst from Aveline's lips, vicious and sincere. "Yes, I would have. The Apples of Eden are not toys, they destroy lives! I would never let someone walk into a situation with them unprepared, even if they were my worst enemies!"

Silence fell through the clearing, amplifying the echoes of her outburst. Kanen'to:kon stared at her in shock. He had known that she hated the Pieces of Eden, that her stepmother's cruelty with the
Apple had left a permanent stamp on her mind. But he had thought that she hated the Templar's more than she feared the Apple.

It seemed that Aveline had thought that too, considering the colour that suffused her cheeks. Stepping back and taking a deep breath, she pulled away from Kanen'to:kon entirely and straightened.

"Look," she said, "I am aware that I have been cruel in our alliance so far. But now that a Piece of Eden is involved, we can not afford to act in such a way to each other. I apologize for my actions, but now we need to pool our information together if we are to take the Hessian down."

Ratonhnake:ton pressed his lips together and cocked his head to one side slightly. His nostrils flared, and Kanen'to:kon could see him thinking.

"...Alright," he said slowly, "but now is not the time. We still need to get to the fort." He held up a hand to stop Kanen'to:kon's protests. "I will," he said warily, "share what I know. But getting there before von Statten leaves is more important."

Kanen'to:kon grit his teeth, but he could see Ratonhnake:ton's point. They did need to keep moving before the Hessian moved again. Glancing over, he saw that Aveline seemed to be just as happy as he was about being put off, but she nodded.

Returning to their horses, they quickly began to move back through the trees. Briefly, Kanen'to:kon looked back at the bodies, still lying there in that strange pattern. He would sing for their souls, later, when they were not on the trail of their killer. But for now, he did his best to put them out of his mind. They had a battle coming up, for the Hessian would certainly not go down easily.

They reached Fort William Henry by late afternoon, the silence between them almost unbearable.

This silence, though, was not out of anger. No, this silence was a thoughtful one. All three of them were mulling over what had been said back with the bodies; and while Kanen'to:kon could n't say with any certainty what Aveline or Ratonhnake:ton were thinking, he knew that his head was spinning.

Firstly, the bodies. They had been killed with an Apple of Eden. Kanen'to:kon hadn't even known that that was possible! Oh, he had heard the stories of them being used to control people, to create illusions, but to kill someone and make them smile about it? Such a thing had never even been whispered to him.

Secondly, the fact that Ratonhnake:ton had known. Kanen'to:kon knew that he had had a point when defending himself; had Kanen'to:kon and Aveline been the ones to know of the Apple, it was doubtful that they would have told Ratonhnake:ton. But still, Kanen'to:kon's heart clenched. Before, even in the face of Ratonhnake:ton's distress, Kanen'to:kon hadn't quite realized that they were truly on opposite sides. The Star Woman's words, about him saving Ratonhnake:ton, had swirled comfortingly around his heart, telling him that everything would be okay.

But the look on his face when he was confronted over his silence - that had pierced through him like an arrow. The unashamed, almost sullen expression that Kanen'to:kon had seen.

That was not the friend he remembered.

And then there was Aveline's outburst. Her reveal that she would have told even a Templar if there was an Apple involved she would have warned everyone. Risking a glance over his shoulder, he saw that she appeared to be lost in thought on her horse. Kanen'to:kon didn't know what to think of
that. She had been so very firm and spiteful in her interactions with Ratonhnhake:ton, and then her distress...

He would have to talk to her later, once they got away from Ratonhnhake:ton.

Finally, just as the silence was becoming truly unbearable, the fort came into sight. Hidden behind trees, its low squat walls jutted over the lake beside them like a pouting child's chin. Or rather, an old man's chin, Kanen'to:kon thought as he took in the crumbling battlements. For a moment, doubt made him waver on top of his horse. The fort looked abandoned at first glance, with no signs of life surrounding it. Then a slight gleam caught his attention, sunlight playing off of metal, and he saw them.

Cannons, bristling out of the walls like beard stubble and placed far too carefully to have just been left behind by the fort's previous owners. Reaching out beside him, he snagged Aveline's coat as she walked past on her own horse.

"Aveline," he said softly, "look."

Looking where he pointed with his chin, her eyes narrowed. "Those are cannons," she said, "and they do not look as old as they should be."

"No," murmured Ratonhnhake:ton as he came to a stop beside them, "they do not." He too was squinting at the fort. His nostrils flared. "I can smell smoke as well."

Taking a quick whiff of the air, Kanen'to:kon could smell it as well. "It looks like your source was right, then," he said.

Ratonhnhake:ton just hummed thoughtfully.

"Well," sighed Aveline after a minute of silence, "we've found him. Now how do we get to him?"

Sucking on his lower lip, Kanen'to:kon scanned the land around the fort. When they had first crested the hill, the fort had dragged all of his attention away. But looking around now, he could see at least a few ways into the fort.

First, there was an approach through the forest. The trees here were old and tall and strong, more than capable of holding a man's weight. But even from where they were standing, Kanen'to:kon could tell that they did not go up all the way to the fort's walls. The only trees close to the wall were thin and young. Kanen'to:kon could not trust them to keep them aloft.

Then there was the front gate. It was open now, with no signs of people walking around inside. But every bit of his assassin training screamed in horror at the very thought.

Finally, there was by the lake. Looking at the wall, there would undoubtedly be plenty of handholds for them, with the cannon slits being wide enough to slip through. The only problem was the lake itself. There was some ice on its surface, white and looking thick, but Kanen'to:kon knew that it was too early in the year for it to hold his weight without trouble.

"I do not want to try that ice," Ratonhnhake:ton murmured. Looking over, Kanen'to:kon saw that he too had been scanning their surroundings. "It is too early for it to be anywhere near thick enough to hold our weight."

"We hit the same problem if we try the trees, though," Aveline replied. Her eyes had the golden tint of her special vision, and she was staring at the trees closest to the wall. "Besides, we aren't going out into the middle of the lake. We can just hug the shore until we reach the cliffs."
Ratonhnhake:ton shook his head, pressing his lips together tightly. "I do not like it," he said quietly, "I would rather try the trees. At the very least, we could see into the fort before actually entering it."

Aveline scowled. Hastily, Kanen'to:kon interjected before it could blow up into another argument.

"Since we cannot decide," he said, "why don't we try both? Ratonhnhake:ton, you can try the trees while Aveline and I check the ice."

Thankfully, despite scowling at each other, both of them agreed to it. Kanen'to:kon sighed as he and Aveline made their way down to the edge of the lake. It was exhausting, keeping the two of them from ripping each other's throats out; the two of them were just so strong-willed, so devoted to their orders that -

No. Despite the fact that he hadn't been able to speak to Ratonhnhake:ton alone, Kanen'to:kon could not let go of his suspicions. He would not let go! Once they had killed the Hessian, then they would be able to speak, he was sure!

"Kanen'to:kon," Aveline said, jerking him out of his thoughts.

Looking around, he realized that they had reached the edge of the lake. Half-sheltered by the long branches of the trees at the water's edge, he could still see the fort up above, hunched over on the hill that it was built on. Aveline had already dismounted her own horse and was by the water's edge, gently poking at the ice.

Dismounting his own horse, he came over to have a closer look at the ice as well. Underneath his gloved hand it felt solid enough, but his hand was not his body weight.

Standing up, he placed his hands on his hips and nudged the ice with a toe.

"It seems solid enough," Aveline said. Kanen'to:kon shook his head.

"It needs to be tested with an actual person, though," he said quietly. He tugged at a braid as the two of them stared at the ice speculatively. Both of them knew that there was only one way to test the ice, but neither wanted to be the first to say it.

It was Kanen'to:kon that broke first.

"I have to walk out on it," he said.

"No," Aveline denied, "it's too dangerous."

"Well, how else will we test it?"

"Our packs are fairly heavy -"

"But they do not move like a person." Kanen'to:kon sighed and turned to Aveline, taking her hand in his. "Listen," he said softly, "I am the heaviest person here. If the ice can hold me, then it can hold you two as well. Better we test it now than have it fall apart underneath us mid-mission."

She turned her face away, staring at the gleaming ice again. He'd bet that she was regretting pushing for the lake approach. He'd bet that she was regretting pushing for the lake approach. He wondered if she had only pushed for it because Ratonhnhake:ton hadn't liked it.

It was a moot point. Pulling away, she nodded grimly, and with a quick sigh he was out on the ice,
carefully putting one foot in front of the other and listening for the first sound of cracking.

But the ice held, this close to the shore. Looking back towards the fort, Kanen’to:kon squinted, trying to make out the ice closer to the cliff. He couldn't quite tell with the sun going down, but he thought that the ice right under and closest to the rock was a few shades darker. Glancing to the side, he noticed that a matching patch of ice was nearby, just a little further out from the shore.

He chewed his lip. He wasn't quite sure if that ice there was the same as the ice closer to the fort; but at the same time, he didn't dare go closer in case he was spotted and the Hessian fled. And falling through the ice mid-mission would be devastating.

So slowly, he shuffled forward towards the other patch of ice, praying that it would hold his weight. Every creak beneath his feet had his nerves jumping underneath his skin, imagining the plunge into the cold, dark water. Finally, though, he reached the ice. Carefully shifting his weight back and forth, it held his weight with only a little creaking. He turned back to grin at Aveline, relief making his pulse jump underneath his skin.

Then he was underwater, the cold black lake water seeping into his skin. His mind screaming, he struggled to move, his limbs only replying sluggishly, as if they could not hear what his mind was telling him. Up above him, he saw light. Struggling towards it, he grasped the grey edges of what had to be the ice that he had fallen through, ignoring how it bit into his hands and tore them open.

Pulling his head above water, he could hear Aveline, her voice high with fear, saying something that he couldn't make out through the water still filling his ears. Trying to haul himself out, he couldn't feel the ice scraping through his clothes and tearing at his chest and arms. All he could see was the bright red splatter and smear on the white ice, steaming in the cold air. Then he was moving more, faster, being hauled away from the cold water and towards the shore where Aveline was waiting, her eyes wide and frightened, and then he was being rolled onto his back and he could see Ratonhnhake:ton's face before everything went black.
Connor heard the crack of the ice breaking from halfway up the hill to the fort. Whipping his head around, he immediately spotted the dark hole in the ice that hadn't been there before.

His heart dropped down to his feet.

Flying through the trees, he hit the shoreline in record time. Already, Aveline was beginning to crawl across the ice, spreading out her weight properly so that she wouldn't join Kanen'to:kon in the water. Clutched tight in one pale-knuckled hand was a length of rope. Without hesitating, Connor joined.

The ice burned, even through his thick autumn clothing, creaking dangerously in a warning that if they were not careful they would join their friend in the cold, dark water. Immediately, Connor crouched and lay down flat on it to better spread his weight out before scooting forward. The black water splashed at the edges of the broken ice, contrasting the grasping brown hands that twisted and grasped at the sharp edges of the ice.

The palms of the hands were red, now, sliced open on sharp edges. As Connor watched, he saw them sink down under the water before springing up again, as they had before, but this time the pauses were getting longer and longer. His vision narrowing down to a tunnel, Connor's hands shot out and grabbed Kanen'to:kon's arm as they broke the surface again.

He couldn't remember getting this close.

Pulling his friend's head clear, he let one hand go and grabbed the scruff of Kanen'to:kon's collar, hauling with all of his strength and pulling, pulling, pulling until they were back on the white ice and shaking as red spread all around them.

His ears ringing, Connor just lay there for a moment and caught his breath. Across from him, Kanen'to:kon's face was pale, his eyelids fluttering as he shook from the cold.

The cold. He needed to warm Kanen'to:kon up.

Sitting up, he was immediately met by a blanket being thrown over his head. Pulling it off, he looked at Aveline, who was throwing another one over Kanen'to:kon.

"Get dried off as best you can," she ordered tersely. "We have to get him warm and dry."

Tiredness swept through Connor, making his hands tremble. Not bothering to argue (for what was there to argue about?), he quickly towed off the worst of the lake water as Aveline tucked the blanket a little tighter around Kanen'to:kon and dragged him fully onto dry land.

"There's a cave we passed a few hundred meters from here," Aveline said once Kanen'to:kon was off the ice. "We can hide in there while we warm up."

Again, with nothing to argue over, they quickly found themselves in somewhat cramped but serviceable quarters. The cave was small, with a narrow opening that barely let them drag Kanen'to:kon in with them and forced them to crawl in on hands and knees one at a time. Even after opening up a few meters in, the ceiling was too low for Connor to fully stand up.

It was after hiding the horses and starting a fire that Connor noticed it. Blood was spotting the blanket Kanen'to:kon was lying in. Unwrapping him, Connor's gut clenched.
The ice had done more damage than he thought. Like knives the broken and jagged edges had sliced through his clothes and flesh, leaving him bleeding enough for Connor to know that several of the gashes would need to be stitched up. Reaching for his pack, which was lying on top of the bedrolls they had rolled out, he quickly opened it and began to dig through.

"What are you-?" Aveline began to ask, looking up from the fire she was starting. She hissed when she saw the injuries.

"I have some training," Connor offered, his lips numb. "I can fix this."

Looking up, he saw her press her lips together, nostrils flaring; but she nodded rather than arguing. Good, he thought distantly. Kanen'to:kon didn't need arguments right now.

Even with his hands numb from the cold water and shaking from nerves, it was no trouble stitching his friend's flesh closed. As the waxed twine passed through the brown skin, Connor began to think ahead.

What else would they have to do? Lectures, soberly stated by Doctor White when he visited, rose in his memories. Warmth. Kanen'to:kon needed warmth, and to get out of his cold clothes. The fire was a start, but one of the best ways to warm someone up was with body heat. And for the most effective transfer, there would have to be very little clothing between the two of them.

Connor wasn't sure how that would go, though. Aveline did not like him, and he wasn't sure how she would feel about being weaponless in front of him. And quite frankly, he wasn't sure how happy he would be knowing that she would be so close to him with weapons, either. And even if they were both weaponless, that didn't mean that they were unarmed, necessarily -

Lifting his head as he finished the final stitch, he opened his mouth to at least start negotiating on what it would take to warm Kanen'to:kon up and stopped.

Folding her shirt neatly and placing it beside the small armoury that was lying beside her bedroll, Aveline glanced over her shoulder at him and raised an eyebrow. "You know," she said, standing up to wiggle out of her trousers, "that would probably be a lot easier if you peeled those wet clothes off of him."

Connor swallowed. For some reason, he found his eyes following her hands as she folded her now-shed trousers and placed them on top of her shirt. Her chemise was rather thin and fine for late autumn, he noticed, letting him see hints of curves beneath it. Lace trimmed its collar and sleeves, starkly white against her dark skin.

Turning his head, he took her advice and began to tug at Kanen'to:kon's clothing, glad that the cave was dim enough to hide the burning of his cheeks. Desperately, he tried to convince himself that it was because of the finely sculpted body that was becoming evident underneath his hands.

Kanen'to:kon had certainly grown up in the time that they had been apart. Gone was the softness of youth, like a fat wolf pup just come out of its den. Now there was nothing but muscle underneath his hands as he began to wrap up his friends injuries, the promise of a strong hunter having followed through. His hands brushed against leather and Connor looked down. His pressed his lips together.

A strong warrior too.

Glancing up at his face, Connor was reassured by its roundness that not everything about his friend had changed. Rummaging through his own nearby bag, he pulled out a bundle of bandages and
began to wind them around Kanen'to:kon's injuries, wincing internally at the chill of his skin. He did not have much longer before he would have to mimic the female Assassin and lie down with Kanen'to:kon.

Speaking of which, she had now stripped down to her underclothing and packed her overclothes away. Now she was kneeling, her back straight, and looking down at Kanen'to:kon with a soft look in her eyes.

"How much longer until you are done?" she asked. Her voice was rough.

"For bandaging?" Connor asked. Tying off the last bit of gauze, he glanced up at her. "It is done. However, it will take longer for him to warm up -"

She gave a short, sharp nod, her eyes never leaving Kanen'to:kon's slack face.

"Do what you must," she said, her voice soft. "Kanen'to:kon must not die."

Already tugging at his shirt, Connor very nearly paused at the sheer affection in her voice. It occurred, then, to him, that perhaps he had misread the reasons as for why she was there.

She was not there to keep an eye on Kanen'to:kon, in case he went rogue. She was there because she loved him.

Finishing tugging his shirt off, he turned his face and tried to keep calm.

He had not expected that. He had not thought, with all of the stories he had been told, that Assassins were capable of that.

But now, thinking back as he pulled off his trousers, that had been rather silly, hadn't it? Numbly, now, he was recalling some other parts of those stories that were, perhaps, not lingered on, but definitely present. Uncle Shay's affectionate stories of the trouble he got up to while training with his Assassin friends. His father's tales of his father, and how his affection had shaped Haytham into the man he was today. Kanen'to:kon, his sweet friend for as long as he could remember. Even the rage on the Assassin's face that day in the woods when he was nearly gutted like a fish - hadn't he said that Connor had shot his pregnant wife?

...How had that thought taken root in his head? Thinking that Assassins were incapable of friendship, of love. Such a ridiculous idea; did not all men desire companionship, a home with a loving partner, friends to spend time with? Connor supposed that with everything that he had gone through he had never thought too hard about the Assassins, had never had a reason to, but that excuse rang hollow and false inside of his head.

Had he been acting callously all this time? He had condemned that Assassin that he had caught during that night at Southgate to torture; he couldn't lie to himself about that. Had that Assassin had friends? Family?

Lying down beside his friend, the fire at his feet and the female Assassin on Kanen'to:kon's other side, his mind was churning unpleasantly. Pulling the blanket up over them, he threw a leg over his friend's body, staring into nothing.

Or not nothing.

"What are you staring at?" Aveline asked, already curled around Kanen'to:kon with an arm underneath his head and one flung over his broad, bare chest.
Connor started guiltily.

"I am sorry," he said quietly. "A thought had just struck me - I was not staring at you."

She let out a small huff of air. "What sort of thought?" she asked, moving a hand up from Kanen'to:kon's chest to gently stroke his pale face. "Did you think that I would not be willing to help Kanen'to:kon recover?"

Connor swallowed.

After a painfully long moment of silence, she dragged her eyes away from Kanen'to:kon's face to stare at him incredulously.

"You believed that," she said flatly, surprise submerging any anger in her tone. "You believed that I would not help save him."

Connor squirmed slightly, avoiding her eyes. "I did not believe that you would willingly disarm yourself," he said, the words being dragged out of him reluctantly. "I thought that I would have to argue -"

"Why?"

Ah, there was the anger. Connor drummed his fingers on Kanen'to:kon's ribs.

"When we first met, you were so fervently against joining with me to hunt von Statten," he said. "I thought that you were here to watch Kanen'to:kon, make sure that he was toeing the Assassin line -"

"Watching him?" Her eyebrows drew together fiercely, thunderous with offence. "Kanen'to:kon needs no watching. He is an excellent Assassin, and has been for years; he joined of his own free will -"

"What." Connor started, drawing back slightly. Kanen'to:kon moaned underneath them, causing them both to hastily cuddle back up to him, tugging the blanket up higher. Laying their heads on his chest, they stared at each other, the confusion on her face mirroring his own.

"Why - I don't - why would he join you?" he finally burst out in frustration. "Why would the boy I know join a bunch of murderers? He was nothing like you -"

"What do you think we are like?" Aveline asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Incapable of love, of caring? The only reason he even joined was because he wanted to save you!"

Connor reared back at that, her words slapping him in the face like a bucket of cold water. "Save me?" he asked. "What do I need to be saved from?"

But the woman was retreating now, looking embarassed. "That is not my story," she said gruffly.

On impulse, he reached across and grabbed her arm, stopping her. "You cannot say something like that and then not explain," he said, injecting all of his firmness into his voice.

"Watch me," she replied, tugging her arm free.

Connor looked at her reproachfully. "Saying such a thing -" he started, before stopping. Squeezing his eyes shut, he took a deep breath and let it out before opening them again. "Everything I know," he began slowly, "everything I have experienced with Assassins - none of it has shown your kind to
be anything like the person I knew Kanen'to:kon to be. Assassins -" He stopped, a lump growing in his throat. For just a second, he was back there in the forest, on his back with his face and stomach wet with blood. Shaking his head, he banished the scene, reminding himself of the warm muscle under his arm. "They have done much to harm me; to harm the people I knew and loved. If you know anything that could explain why a gentle person such as Kanen'to:kon willingly joined you -"

He trailed off, not knowing how to end his explanation. Across from him, her eyes flashing from where she was resting her head on Kanen'to:kon's shoulder, Aveline narrowed her eyes.

"Before you start flinging accusations around and acting as if your Order is spotless," she growled, "I would like to remind you that it is a Templar that we are currently chasing after, not an Assassin."

The words were on the tip of his tongue; a denial that von Statten's actions reflected on the Order. But Connor bit them back, swallowing their bile.

Because even if von Statten's actions were not how a true Templar should act, that did not erase the fact that he had started out as a Templar. It did not erase that his father had easily accepted him into their ranks, that he had risen far due to how relentlessly he hunted the Order's enemies.

His father's words echoed in his head.

*I can use a vicious dog; a rabid one, however, is a liability.*

Sleep did not come easy; consequently, morning came too soon for Connor's tastes.

Being in a cave, he was not woken by sunlight or bird song. Rather, what woke him was a stirring of the broad chest that was serving as his pillow.

Warm in a way he hadn't been since leaving New York, he didn't want to wake up. All he wanted to do was burrow a little deeper into his pillow and go back to sleep. But something was stirring at the back of his mind, forcing him to get up. So with a sigh and blinking the sleep out of his eyes, Connor looked up lazily, his brain not quite processing what he was seeing.

Aveline was already up and dressed, her weapons in place, with no trace of her vulnerability the previous night remaining. She had repacked her bags and was carefully slicing up some salted meat into portions. Connor's own pack was where he had left it the previous night, sprawled out in the cave messily, reflecting his state of mind.

But there was something different. As a hand reached up and carefully brushed some of his hair away from his neck, Connor hummed to himself and tried to force his sleep-addled brain to focus.

Wait.

Connor sat bolt upright, dragging his blanket up to his chin, and looked down beside him. Lying on the ground, pale and tired but smiling up at him with unfocused eyes, was Kanen'to:kon.

"What is wrong, Ratonhnhake:ton?" he asked, his voice quiet yet pleased.

Aveline coughed.

Kanen'to:kon jumped. Blinking rapidly as if to banish the sleep from his mind, he began to prop
himself up on one arm before suddenly stiffening. Automatically, Connor let the blanket drop to his lap and reached out to gently guide Kanen'to:kon back down onto his bedroll.

"What happened?" Kanen'to:kon rasped, his eyes darting between him and Aveline. "How did we get here?"

"You fell through the ice while you were testing it," Aveline said, shuffling over on her knees with a few strips of the salted meat that she had been cutting up. "Ratonhnhake:ton and I brought you here to warm you up and treat your injuries."

Kanen'to:kon looked at the bandages on his arms as if it was the first time he had seen them. Connor supposed that this actually was the first time he had seen them.

"You cut them up rather badly on the ice," he said, taking pity on his friend. "I stitched them up while Aveline began to warm you up."

Kanen'to:kon blinked up at them, looking puzzled.

"Oh," he said. "I suppose that that explains it."

Dividing the meat equally and handing a portion to each of them, Aveline continued to speak, his face cool and professional.

"I went out while you two were still asleep," she said, "continuing to scout. We should be safe on the ice closest to the cliff, but going through the trees to that point will probably be safest. Also, I was able to confirm that the Hessian is in the fort; he seems to be waiting for another party to arrive to hand the Apple off to."

Connor frowned, reminded of Eleanor's words back in town. Chewing fiercely on his share of the meat, he wondered who these people were. How had they become aware of the Pieces of Eden and their capabilities? And what was this mess with 'submission to a higher will'?

But Aveline was continuing to speak, forcing him to drag his attention back to her rather than dwell on such mysteries.

"The party will arrive tomorrow, so our best chance to kill him is likely today, while the amount of guards are still low."

Slowly, Kanen'to:kon sat up and began to pull at his own meat. Every movement seemed to aggravate the gashes across his chest, causing him to wince as Connor watched him in concern. Aveline, too, had fallen silent as he sat up, her own eyes soft with worry.

"The Hessian is a tough opponent," Kanen'to:kon said once he was finally half-vertical. His face was drawn tight in pain, and one hand seemed to keep skittering back to his chest. "I'm not sure if I will be able to help in this."

Aveline's lips tightened along with Connor's. He didn't want to admit it, but Kanen'to:kon was right; von Statten was a terrifying warrior, and having one of their own helpers down already was not helpful. Looking across, he saw the same thoughts passing over Aveline's face.

"That was actually what I was getting to," Aveline admitted after an awkward silence. She looked pained but resolute as she looked down at Kanen'to:kon, only her twiddling fingers giving away her nervousness. "I do not want you to come with us to the fort."

There was a pause, almost as if the world was holding its breath. Then Kanen'to:kon let out a long,
low sigh through his nose, looking resigned. "You are alright going in with only Ratonhnake:ton backing you up?" he asked, his eyes darting in between the two of them.

"I do not like it," she said simply, her eyes sliding over to Connor, "but it is all I can do. I can not take the Hessian down alone, and you can not fight in your condition. Accepting Ratonhnake:ton is the only choice."

Well. Connor felt special. If it was not so urgent that they kill von Statten and retrieve the Apple, he would say something.

But he was not a child. So when the two of them looked over at him, waiting for his reaction, he simply nodded stoically. Von Statten came first, his feelings last. He was a professional, after all.

"Alright then," Kanen'to:kon said, sounding tired. "I will do my best to have everything ready for our escape." Reaching out, he placed a hand over each of theirs.

"Come back safe," he said. "Both of you."
Hunting Hessians Part 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Knives.
Ammunition.
Sword.
Tomahawk.
Bow.
Arrows.
Gloves.
Knives.
Ammunition.
Sword.
Tomahawk.
Bow.
Arrows.
Gloves.

Connor repeated the list of his supplies over and over in his head as he scuttled up the cliff after Aveline, the cold rock biting through even the thick leather of his climbing gloves. Carefully wrapped to muffle any clinking, he had decided to err on the side of caution when it came to von Statten, a decision that he was fairly certain Aveline had come to as well, judging by the high number of knife hilts he had seen sticking out of her belt.

Then again, there was no such thing as being too careful when it came to an assassination; or really, any assignment. At the very least, he could appreciate her caution. For all of their fighting during the trip here, Connor had to admit that she was a pure professional when it came to their work. After leaving Kanen'to:kon behind at the cave, finishing preparations for their escape, all of the cold spite she had showed towards him previously melted away into a different coldness, that of an artisan focusing on a new piece to the exclusion of everything else. It actually reminded him of Ellen when she was making a new suit for his father - pure concentration on the task at hand.

Concentration that he should have too.

Subtly shaking his head, he refocused on the task ahead of them as they reached the cannon slits in the wall. Peeking through, Connor quickly skipped his eyes around, drinking in the details of what he could see.

The ground was frozen in the shapes of ruts where wagon wheels had driven over it earlier, leading
directly towards where the offending vehicle was hidden in the shadow of the artfully crumbling bulk of the main building. Connor couldn't help but be impressed at the repairs he could see. While still keeping up the impression of a broken-down and half-destroyed wooden house, his practised eye could pick out the signs of fresh mortar and wood, artfully stained and aged to the point where anyone less sharp-eyed would most likely be totally fooled.

Glancing over, he could tell that Aveline had come to the same conclusion. Looking back through the hole in the wall, he took a quick look with his Eagle Eye View and was satisfied to see that there were only five people in the fort as far as he could see. All of them were in the main building, too, huddled in the corner opposite of the wall he was clinging too. Confidently, he climbed up the rest of the way and began to haul himself over the wall and into the fort.

"Wait!" Aveline whispered harshly, making him pause. "What are you doing? We don't know how many people are here!"

Allowing himself to feel a little smug, Connor blinked at her placidly. "I have special eyes," he explained, keeping his voice even. "There are only five people here, and they're all on the opposite side of that building."

Aveline frowned. "I have 'special eyes' as well," she said coldly, her eyes flashing gold, "and they do not tell me that much information."

Inwardly, Connor raised his eyebrows up into his hairline. He hadn't realized she had such an ability, though he supposed thinking back that it made sense. Outwardly though, he showed none of this, instead shrugging casually and continuing to climb into the fort. "I have very special eyes," he said simply, turning away from her to further survey the inside of the fort.

He smirked slightly as he heard her follow him over the crenellations, keeping his eyes open for any further trouble. The inside of the fort was eerily silent, with not even the birds singing. Clouds covered the sky, letting only weak diffused sunlight through to fill the still air. It felt like the world was holding its breath, waiting for them to spill von Statten's blood on the ground.

Coming up behind him, Aveline slipped back into her cool professional mode, scanning the grounds along with him. Looking closer at the windows on the house, Connor quietly clucked his tongue. This far out, and they were bothering with glass? A criminal waste of time and money, in his opinion.

Though perhaps it was meant to serve as a deterrent. Scanning over the building in front of them, Connor could see very few ways in without having to break one of those glass panes. He grimaced to himself. That would make quite a bit of noise; in this silence, it would be louder still.

As Connor was weighing the risks of doing so, however, Aveline moved past him confidently. Darting across the open ground, she began to crawl up the side of the house like a spider and cursing under his breath, Connor began to follow.

The wood was rough and splintering, even through his gloves. Overall, though, it was sturdy enough to hold both of their weight until they got up to the roof. The shingles worryingly loose underneath his feet, Connor glared at Aveline and raised an eyebrow.

"If we are going to work together," he said through clenched teeth, "I would appreciate being told of what your plan is rather than you just running ahead."

Aveline raised an eyebrow right back at him.
"Is it not obvious?" she asked in an irritationally lofty tone. "We will go through the attic." She rapped her knuckles on the top of the trapdoor she was crouched by for emphasis. A trapdoor that Connor, to his shame, had not noticed.

"It seems that you are not the only one with very special eyes," she said with a grin as she opened the trapdoor. Connor rolled his eyes but followed her in.

Landing softly on his feet, he then very nearly gave them away by sneezing at the dust that covered the room. Clamping a hand over his mouth and nose, he looked around.

It seemed that while the attic had been a bedroom earlier in the fort's history, it had more lately been used as a trash bin. If it wasn't for the cold outside, Connor was certain that the bones and broken furniture that littered the floor would be swarming with insects.

Aveline had already found the trapdoor going down further. Kneeling down beside it, she was about to open it when Connor grabbed her arm in alarm. When she looked at him with irritation, he simply pressed a finger to his lips and gestured to his eyes. For a moment, her frown only deepened, but then she settled back further onto her haunches, crossing her arms.

It was fine. Connor did not expect them to be friends. So long as she was willing to listen to his input, he would be content.

Shifting to his other vision, he saw that the floor beneath them was uninhabited. The enemies on the ground floor were still not moving. Listening carefully, he could almost hear the sound of talking. Once that was satisfied, he nodded to Aveline.

The trapdoor opened with only a whisper of noise. Connor only just caught Aveline putting something away in her belt and felt a small flutter of appreciation at her forethought. He hadn't even thought to bring oil.

The next floor was more of the same. They snuck from cover to cover, their nerves jangling at the ease of their infiltration. Connor did not want to say it, but he was beginning to think that it was too easy as they reached the ground floor. Von Statten was a Templar Knight - he should know better than this. He should have posted guards. From the tension emanating from the woman behind him, Connor knew that Aveline was most likely thinking the same.

They reached the doorway leading the room with the people with no issue. Leaning against the wall, Connor slowly pulled his gun from where it was stashed in the small of his back and settled his thumb on the hammer. If he timed it right, they would be able to kill von Statten before he could react.

Just as he was about to swing around the frame, Aveline's small hand suddenly snuck into his and squeezed out a short pattern. Stopping, he looked back at her in confusion.

For a moment, she seemed equally confused by his reaction. Then she mimed smacking her forehead. Tugging him down so that her lips were brushing his ear and sending shivers down his spine, she breathed into his ear, "I have poison darts that will make them go mad. Let me shoot first and cause confusion; then we will shoot the Hessian."

Poison darts? That was new and troubling, if handy for their current situation. Filing the knowledge away to tell his father, Connor let her quietly move in front of him. From her belt, she pulled a long dark wooden tube and a small dart. Carefully putting the dart inside and raising it to her lips, she peeked around the corner -

And golden light slammed into them like a panicked horse's kick.
Connor blinked away stars, his head aching and ringing like all the church bells in New York were ringing in his head at once. Everything around him seemed to be seen and heard through a thick fog that had him hearing but not comprehending what was going on around him.

"Children," came a sneering, German-accented voice, "thinking that such an obvious strategy would allow them to kill me." Someone spat near Connor's head, splashing a little on his cheek. "It is time to end this and send a message to our enemies, I think."

With great effort, Connor managed to lift his head from the dirty floor. The world seemed to sway and stutter around him, images dividing and coming back together. There were several men, their images dancing in front of his eyes. Dressed soberly in dark colours, the looked more like lawyers than back-country men. The Hessian, still in his dark uniform that was the only thing Connor had seen him wear, was tucking something shining with a golden light away in a pouch on his belt. Then he reached over his shoulder and pulled out his axe.

Connor blinked dumbly as von Statten raised the weapon above his head. The axehead gleamed in the weak sunlight coming through the windows. So did the other men's eyes. Adrenalin surged through his limbs. He lifted his numb and clumsy body and skittered out of the way as the axe came down. It slammed through the weak and rotting floorboards, making splinters fly into the air. Connor's sight, previously blurred, sharpened like sunlight cutting through a morning fog.

Aveline had also fallen to the ground. Like him, she was getting up, clumsily moving away from the Hessian as he hefted his axe again and eyed the two of them with a dark hungry gleam in his eye. A chuckle from the men surrounding them ran through the room. Connor could hear them muttering bets to each other, feel their eyes boring into his back. But he didn't dare take his eyes off of the man in front of him.

Von Statten's eyes almost lazily swung between the two of them. With the energy surging through him, Connor could see the way the other man's hands squeezed and loosened on the handle of his axe.

Deep in his legs, his muscles quivered, ready to move him out of the way or closer as needed. His hands drifted towards the knives hidden along his belt.

And it was that movement that seemed to announce the start of the fight. Connor barely had the time to notice how the Hessian's eyes narrowed before he was swinging his axe at Connor's neck. Connor barely had the time to move out of the way. His feet dragged against the floor in a way that would have had his father tearing strips from his hide with his tongue had he seen it.

Fumbling, he tore out a knife from its sheathe and lunged forward, ducking underneath another swing and slashing at the man's face. Von Statten jerked back, avoiding the wild swing. His arms, still extended, pulled back to catch Connor's follow-up swing. Whether by design or lucky accident, the curve of the axe's dull underside caught the back of Connor's neck and pulled him forward along with von Statten's hands.

Connor stumbled and turned it into a tackle. The two of them fell to the ground with a thud that audibly knocked the wind out of the German's lungs. Rearing up with another dagger in his hand, Connor began to drive it down when a flash of silver flew past his face. Momentarily distracted, he looked behind him.

One of the men stared down at the throwing knife buried in his chest, a battered and slightly rusty sword clattering at his feet. Looking back, Connor saw Aveline pulling out more of her own
throwing knives, a dangerous gleam in her eyes.

That moment of distraction cost him. Underneath him, von Statten let out a roar and slapped away his hand that was holding the dagger, knocking it clear across the room. Tumbling Connor backwards, he then followed up with a savage blow to his jaw.

His head ringing, Connor did not see what Aveline did. But he saw von Statten's reaction of back-handing her hard enough to slam her into a wall when his vision cleared. He reached for another knife from his belt.

And felt nothing underneath his questing fingers. Looking around wildly, he caught a glint of steel - outside of the room. It must have fallen out when he first fell to the ground from the Apple.

A choking noise dragged his attention back to the fight in front of him. A surge of horror lanced through him.

Aveline was pinned against the ground, von Statten kneeling on top of her with his meaty hands wrapped tightly around her neck. Her eyes bulging from her skull, she clawed desperately at the German's hands. Connor knew how she felt, having the life slowly being squeezed from her, the cruel eyes of their attacker looking down at them as they silently pleaded for air -

Connor took a deep breath, forcing himself back into the here and now. He was not four years old anymore, being slowly choked to death underneath someone's foot as his mother burned. He was not helpless, even without weapons.

Aveline let out a small squeaking noise. Connor needed to do something, now. While von Statten was too busy enjoying the Assassin's helplessness to notice him.

A golden glow out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Looking over at the table von Statten had been sitting at, Connor could see the Apple, glowing slightly through the rough weave of its bag. Of course! He lunged towards it.

"Sie -" von Statten snarled behind him as his fingers snagged the cloth and the Apple rolled out. But it didn't matter.

The Piece of Eden almost seemed to burn under his fingers. A fire raced up underneath Connor's skin to his mind, setting him aflame as the glow became brighter. He turned and looked down at the frozen tableau, disgust warrying with anger as all the pain and irritation that this search, this fight, had caused him roared to the forefront of his mind.

Von Statten was half-crouched, half-risen from the floor, one arm outreached as if he could still stop Connor from reaching the Apple. Hatred dripped from his eyes as he stared up at Connor, frozen where he was from the Apple in Connor's hands.

Aveline still lay on the ground, struggling to breathe underneath the weight of the Apple's light. With a thought, Connor eased the pressure keeping her still, letting her greedily suck in the air that her lungs so desperately needed.

For a moment, Connor watched her breathe. His own throat hurt distantly, from some old unimportant memory. Some small part of him wanted to kneel down beside her and help her sit up, but it was unimportant as well. Instead, he turned back to the man frozen in front of him.

A small pulse, and the men that had watching dropped to the floor, their hearts stopped in their chest. Another, and the German man's limbs began to twist and bend like the puppet Connor had seen in a show once at a tavern. His father had been upstairs discussing something with the others
in his Order, the ones Connor called his uncles. The show hadn't been anything special, one of the innumerable 'save the princess' stories that colonists seemed to have. The way von Statten's knees and elbows bent exaggeratedly as he picked up his axe from where it lay reminded him of when the puppet had been 'sneaking' into the 'castle'.

The man was drooling slightly. His eyes were so wide that the whites around the irises could clearly be seen. As Connor made him kneel before him and raise his face, he noted with satisfaction the golden sheen that danced in his eyes like flames. It would almost be a pity to end this.

Connor held out the Apple in front of him and thought at the man. Smoothly and surely, von Statten lifted his axe and began to press its sharp head against his throat. Blood welled up as the whisper-sharp blade sliced through skin, red drops swelling out until they burst and slid down his throat to stain his collar.

He only began to choke when the blade slid through the first part of his windpipe; little wheezing gurgles that barely made it past his clamped-shut lips at first but became louder until the blood was spilling past his lips and down his chin.

"Connor."

Finally the light died in von Statten's eyes. Letting go of his control, Connor watched him fall to the floor with dispassionate eyes before looking back down at the Apple.

It was beautiful. The light that shone from it gave him such control, both over the bodies and minds of men. Beautiful ideas danced through his head as he stared into the Apple's depths, ideas in which he strode out of the shattered fort and spread the Apple's light over the colonies and their people. He would make the colonists understand, then, that they could no longer just take land as they pleased from his people. That they would live side by side in peace with the nations or suffer the consequences.

"Connor!"

He would even end this war between the Templars and the Assassins. Kanen'to:kon would appreciate that, he was sure. They would not have to fight as Connor feared that they would. Even Aveline, who was now staring at him with something that looked like concern on her face would see the sense in what he was doing. He wondered what was causing such a look on her face.

"Aveline," he said, calmly looking at her, "what is wrong?"

Her eyes were wide and flicked between him and the Piece of Eden he held. "Connor," she said pleadingly, "put down the Apple. Please?"

Connor cocked his head and furrowed his brow. Put it down? "Why?" he asked.

"Connor," she said, seemingly ignoring his question, "please, put the Apple down. You are not in your right mind."

Connor frowned. That was a little insulting. "I don't much care for your tone, Assassin," he said tightly.

"Connor -"

Connor growled and reached out to her through the Apple. Could she not understand? He would make her understand what was going on, and she would agree with him -
"L-little wolf," said a familiar voice, "listen t-to her."

A glowing hand laid itself over his. Turning his head, Connor saw the familiar face of Consus, twisted into an unfamiliar look of pity. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw shock flit across Aveline's face.

Ah. So he was not the only person capable of seeing Consus this time. But that was not his concern right now.

"I feel fine," he argued. "Like I could fight anyone."

"But you c-cannot fight," Consus said. His hair stirred in a breeze that only he could feel, and he reached out to Aveline now as well. "Both of you," he said, "c-cannot fight. You cannot afford t-to fight, or they w-will win."

Connor blinked. The light that had been so bright in his hands dimmed. "Who will win?"

But Consus didn't reply. Exhaustion swept over his glowing face, and he simply looked at the two of them pleadingly. His form, so solid looking, suddenly jumped and flickered like a campfire being rained on. Connor jumped a little at the strange sight, and despite himself the Apple dropped from his hands, hitting the floor with a solid thunk.

Consus disappeared along with the Apple's light. And with the light went the strength in Connor's limbs. He dropped to his knees as cold swept through him.

The light that had been so steady when they began their assault now seemed weak, like it was struggling through clouds. Von Statten lay on the floor, the blood from his throat surrounding his head like a bloody halo. Aveline was the only one still standing in the room, staring down at him in what looked like horror and fear.

Connor swallowed, his throat dry. The Apple, even dulled, was a presence in the room. He could remember how he thought while holding it, those seductive thoughts that seemed so very reasonable. He hadn't believed Aveline's words back in the forest with the bodies, about the evil of the Piece of Eden, but now -

"Aveline," he began.

But she was not listening. If he hadn't just been in a fight with the Hessian and been possessed by the Apple, maybe he would have been able to stop her. But even waking up later, Connor would be able to admit to himself that she had been wickedly fast as she slammed the butt of her machete into his temple.

He dropped to the floor like a stone and knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I just realized that I never thanked all of my commenters! Thank you to all of you; you were the ones that kept me going to the very end and cheered me on. Never be afraid to leave a comment!
Connor's knives glittered in the sunlight that was streaming through the window, making the carpet sparkle like a river on a sunny day. A bird twittered from a branch on the tree outside as he continued to very carefully work at the small grooves of his pistol with a soft cloth, his tongue caught between his teeth. He had been cleaning for hours now, to the point that even Okwaho had given up on trying to get affection from him; the wire-tailed dog now lying on his back with his legs splayed wide, snoring and occasionally twitching as he chased after something in his dreams.

Finally, though, Connor couldn't clean the gun anymore. With not a single speck of old gunpowder still trapped in the gear of its hammer, he was forced to put it aside with all of the other cleaned equipment that was lying around.

Sighing, he did just that, tossing down the cloth he had been using onto his desk as well. With nothing else to do, he looked over at his dog and toyed with the idea of waking him up and going for a walk. It would be better than sitting around.

Sitting around, which he would not be doing if it was not for his father's orders. Connor's mood sank as he remembered the dressing down he had gotten from his father.

Haytham had not been pleased when he found out that Connor had not managed to retrieve the Apple. While Connor had been able to keep him from finding out that he had been working with the Assassins to take von Statten down, mentioning their role in the loss of the Piece of Eden had been unavoidable. And Haytham had been furious, hearing of how he had had so 'careless'; how he had been so vulnerable to the Assassins. He had ranted and raved in the privacy of his study, pointing out the ease in which Connor could have been killed at that time - how the Assassins could still be planning to take him out. Immediately, Connor had been unofficially put on leave from the Order and confined to the house.

Connor had protested, pointing towards his previous good work and his success in killing the Hessian. He had pointed out how he had not been killed by the Assassins despite being unconscious; how he had previously taken care of himself on the Frontier, speaking to the different tribes and trying to get them to work with the Templars. He hadn't wanted to stay home; he wanted to go back out there and find Aveline and Kanen'to:kon again, demand answers from them! He had not expected them to agree on who should take custody of the Apple, but he had thought -

He had thought -

It didn't matter what he had thought. Moodily, he gazed at Okwaho. The dog never had such problems in his life. No ambiguity, no being left in a broken manor house in a fort for hours after being left unconscious by someone who had been their (reluctant) ally only seconds previously. All the dog had to worry about was when his next walk would come.

Okwaho farted and gave a wide doggie grin in his sleep. Connor sighed and rubbed his thumb along the side of his index finger.

He really needed to get out of this house, or he was going to go mad.

A knock at the door pulled him out of his sullen sulk. Heaving himself from his chair, Connor weaved his way through the weapons still laying about the room and opened the door.

Ms. Potts, the housekeeper, was standing at the door, primly holding a small tea tray with a steaming pot and some biscuits. "Master Connor," she said as she bustled past him into the room,
"You've been up here for so long, I thought you might appreciate a bite to eat and a nip of tea."

Automatically moving out of her way, he hastily crossed the carpet and quickly cleaned off the top of his desk so that she had someplace to put the tray down. As the older woman bent over the desk, a curl of grey hair escaped from the front of her bonnet and gleamed in the sun. A small bit of guilt curled uncomfortably in Connor's chest. Ms. Potts had spent most of her time in his father's employ being very pointedly not curious about what they did, never asking awkward questions the way some of the maids did. For her to come up and specifically bother him with food and drink meant that he must have worried her quite badly.

"Thank you, Ms. Potts," he said, unable to think of what else to say. "I was just caught up -" he gestured helplessly at the weapons littering the room.

The housekeeper carefully straightened the tray so that it was perpendicular to the edge of the desk and looked up at him critically. Reaching out, she plucked an invisible bit of lint off of his collar and sniffed. "Well," she said, "don't get so caught up again that you miss another meal, you hear me?" Her gaze softened. "You've been worrying your father as well."

Connor pressed his lips together and looked away, back at the tea tray. Ms. Potts sighed.

"Well," she said, "in any case, there was one more reason why I came to you." Looking back over, Connor saw her rummaging through the pockets on her apron before pulling out a folded piece of paper, hastily sealed with a blob of wax.

"This came from a street urchin this morning," she said with a sniff. "The boy said that it was specifically for you. I said that I would get it to you and sent him on his way with a penny."

With his brow furrowed, Connor took the sheet from her calloused hands. "Thank you," he said, looking it over in vain for identifying marks. "Did the boy say anything about how to get a reply to the sender?"

Ms. Potts sniffed again. "No," she said shortly, with all the disdain of the poor in her voice. "The boy took off as soon as I put the money in his hand. Didn't say a word about who hired him. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Connor tapped the paper with a finger thoughtfully. "No, thank you," he said distantly, trying to think of who would send a message specifically to him in such a way. Ms. Potts left after another penetrating look, letting Connor sit back down at his desk. Stuffing a biscuit into his mouth, he reached for one of his cleaned knives and used it to cut away the wax sealing the letter shut. Discarding of the useless blob, he flicked the paper open and began to read.

Dear Ratonhnhake:ton, it began;

I am writing to you to apollogise. I got the full storee from Aveline, about how she nocked you out and took the Apple. I am sorree about that; I had hohped that we might tock more about it, but Aveline sed that it had been nessessary with the way you were acting while holding it. I nowe that you are with in your rites to not want to speak to me. The Assassins have not been your frends, and this was just the latest in a long line of battuls between our two organics. That is why I am asking as your frend and not as an Assassin to cum to ower village so that we may speak man to man, as we did when we were childrin. I hope that we can be onest there like we were bak then. I have much I need to tock to you abowt, to understand. I will wait for you there juring the spring. I hope that you can forgive me long enuff for us to speak.

Your friend, Kanen'to:kon
For several minutes, Connor just stared at the letter. Turning it around and examining it, he could see no signs of Assassin marks. Sniffing it, it only smelt of ink and paper.

He carefully set it down on his desk and stared at it.

He wanted to refuse. To burn it and sit and sulk more in his room, agonizing over the world's unfairness. He wanted to run to his father, confess everything and beg for his help in figuring this out. He wanted to pack a bag and jump on Akweks immediately.

How was he to reply to this? Kanen'to:kon had been his friend - but that was in past tense for a reason; he was now one of the Assassins. And while a large part of Connor insisted that Kanen'to:kon could be trusted, a small insistent part was loudly pointing out how he had trusted Aveline on that mission, and look at how that had turned out, hmm?

He bit his lip and looked over the letter again. The splotches of ink, the carefully-shaped letters - Kanen'to:kon to:kon had spent a lot of time and care with this letter. His friend had known the English alphabet when they had first separated, but had never been entirely comfortable with writing in it. That he would go through such effort...

Connor paused in front of his father's study, his hand up and about to knock against the door when an Irish-accented voice floated through the thick dark wood.

"Sir," Shay said, "before I go, may I ask something?"

There was a pause, and then his father's voice, low and warning, came through as well. "That depends on what you are asking."

"I was just curious as to whether or not Connor would be joining us for supper, what with his grounding and all."

There was a squeak, as if someone was shifting in their seat.

"Grounding?"

Another pause. Connor leaned in closer to the door. He could practically imagine the embarrassed look on Shay's face, how he would fold his hands in front of him and straighten his back while looking at everything except Haytham. His father would be in that slouch that was not a slouch in his chair, his hands steepled in front of his face as he stared Shay down with eyes that were as cold and pitiless as steel.

A nervous cough. "We-ell, sir," Shay said, "I just hadn't seen him in a while. No one has, since he came back from taking out von Statten. So there's a rumour going around that he messed something up and you've restricted his movements. So," and there was the soft rasp of cloth on cloth; a shrug, "everyone's been calling it a grounding."

Connor winced. Dread coiled in his gut. Everyone knew? He knew how people talked due to him being the Grandmaster's son; to have it referred to so childishly was just embarassing. More steel entered his spine; he definitely would have to convince his father to allow him to go to Kanatahseton.

Turning back to the office, there was only a deadly silence. He could hear a slight squeak from the floorboards, most likely Shay shifting uncomfortably underneath his father's penetrating gaze.

"...I don't usually call it that," the Irishman said hesitantly. "I'm just reporting what people are
saying. And it's not to say that people don't respect you - it's just that, well," and Connor could so easily picture the shrug he was undoubtedly giving, "he's a full Templar Knight. But his daddy's keeping him off the field. It's just seen as odd."

The soft tap of a finger on top of leather-topped desk. "It is not their business," Connor's father said, his voice icy. "He was injured after disposing of von Statten. He needs to rest."

"For the whole winter and into spring? You'd think he got gutted again, the way you're fussing." Another creak, that of someone leaning forward. "Sir, I know it's not my place -"

"And yet you continue to speak -"

"- But you're doing more harm than good in this. I know how worried you are about making sure Connor is settled before you die. You've done a great job, but its harming his reputation right now to be grounded - you're acting as a father and not a Grandmaster. He's a full knight, and deserves to be treated as one rather than a silly child."

"That is enough, Shay," Haytham said, his voice like the crack of a whip. "You are dismissed."

Shuffling, Connor moved away from the door and tried to look like he hadn't been eavesdropping as Shay exited the room. He wasn't sure if he succeeded; Shay only flashed him a sympathetic look as he passed by and began to make his way down the stairs.

No sound was emanating from the study now. Connor swallowed and took a deep breath, straightening his spine. People were beginning to talk, he reminded himself. His father was a proud man. Pushing on that point was likely to bring his father back to sense and allow him to leave the house. And the village was far from colonist civilization anyways; very few people knew where it was, and it was doubtful that the Assassins would either.

Well. Probably most Assassins wouldn't know where it was. Kanen'to:kon was many things, but Connor was fairly sure that he wouldn't give up the location of their people to anyone outside of the tribe, same as him. Not even his father knew the exact location of Kanatahseton.

"Connor," Haytham said, his voice tired as it floated from the room, "I know that you're out there. Stop dawdling and come in here to say whatever your piece is."

Connor barely kept a squeak from leaving his mouth. Quickly straightening back up, he composed his face and walked into the study, ready for the fight to begin.

The study looked the same as ever; plain and boring, with a desk overflowing with paper. If anything, there was more paper than the last time Connor had been in the room, his father looking even more tired and old than before. The fine lines around his eyes and mouth had deepened, and his skin looked thinner than before. The light shining in through the room's single window only highlighted the dust in the air, stirred up from the constant movement of papers and people in and out.

But his expression was not tired. It was as sharp as always, if a little unfocused at the moment. He was staring at the wall, a thoughtful cast to his features. Connor felt his heart lighten slightly. It looked like Shay's words had at least got him to start thinking about how things looked to those outside of their house. Now all he had to do was push a little further, and it was likely that he would succeed in getting permission to visit his village.

Stopping in front of the desk, Connor folded his hands behind him and tried to keep from looking uncomfortable. His father's gaze skipped over his frame, assessing him steadily. From the way his
eyes crinkled at the corners slightly, Connor suspected that he was not entirely successful.

Nothing for it, though.

"Father," he began. "I wanted to ask for your permission for something."

Haytham lifted an eyebrow slightly. Connor swallowed.

"I would like to visit my village," he said in a rush. "I have not been there for quite some time, and -"

"No."

Connor stuttered to a halt. "Why not?" The whining tone of his voice made him internally wince.

Haytham leaned forward in his chair, steepling his hands in front of his face. "For starters," he said slowly, "we still have no idea why you were left alive by the Assassins when they ambushed you. Secondly -"

"Perhaps they simply did not recognize me," Connor interrupted. "I had been hiking through the frontier for several weeks at that point -"

"Secondly," his father said, shooting him a warning glare, "I need you here -"

"Doing what?" Connor snapped. He could feel himself flushing. "All I have done since I returned from that mission is sit around and clean my weapons. It is embarrassing! Everyone has noticed!"

His father's eyebrows drew together, resembling thunderclouds in both colour and mood. "Watch yourself, Ratonhnhake:ton," he said, the use of his old name a clear warning that he was overstepping his bounds, "I am still your Grandmaster -"

"And you are not acting like it!" Connor replied. "You are acting as my father, and everyone can tell! You heard Shay's words; they are mocking us over this!"

Clearly stung, his father leaned back in his chair. "Well then," he said icily, "what would you propose to solve this problem, then? While still keeping in mind that the Assassins are acting rather more opaquely than usual."

Connor took a breath and let it out, cooling his temper and putting his thoughts in order. His father was listening, but Connor was not sure for how long. "Visiting my village will be what solves this," he said softly. "No one knows where it is, not even you, which means that I would still be safe from the Assassins; and his gut only gave a small twinge at the lie, "far safer than if I stayed in New York. While I'm there I can also do my work for the Order - even isolated we regularly get gossip from the other tribes surrounding us and hunters that are passing through. My whole network out there cannot be working as well as it usually does with me here. If I am there, the information we need of the situation out there will flow faster. And once that is done, the rumours will be put to rest and soon forgotten." He could see his father considering it, and pressed onwards.

"As well, it has been a long time since I have been there - I need to make sure that they know I still have their best interests in mind."

"Because time and distance has a tendency to make people doubt that," Haytham muttered, staring into space with his knuckles pressed against his lips. He shook his head slightly and sat back up, leaning forward.

"You are certain that no one knows of the exact location of your village?" he demanded.
Connor nodded frantically. "We moved several times after the fire," he said. "And we do not allow traders to come into the valley. The only people who know of our location are the members of our tribe - and they are not likely to give up our location easily."

His father's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Connor held his breath.

Then he nodded once.

"With conditions," he warned. "I want you to regularly check in with an operative in the area - Clipper Wilkinson. And I expect you back before autumn."

Connor was so relieved that he only nodded, smiling.
Walking through the woods towards Kanatahseton, his weapons stowed away in his travel packs except for the tomahawk hanging at his hip, leading Akweks by the bridle, he could feel the layers of Connor being stripped away. Every bit of sunlight shining through the light green leaves, ever stump, every animal that scuttled away from him in alarm brought another piece of Ratonhnhake:ton back to the surface of his mind. By the time he reached the gates of the village, he was itching to change out of Connor's clothes and into Ratonhnhake:ton's hides.

"Ratonhnhake:ton!"

"Ratonhnhake:ton!"

'Ratonhnhake:ton! Over here!"

Ratonhnhake:ton couldn't help but smile back as the children of the village rushed forward as one to greet him. Bending over slightly, he allowed them to grab his arms, tugging him every which way while staring up in awe at the pack-laden Akweks. The dark bay snorted behind him, dancing slightly in place and arching her neck as several children got closer to her with their hands out.

"Ratonhnhake:ton, can I pet Akweks?" asked one little girl; she was closest, her hands reaching up to Akweks' nose. Crouching down to let a little boy climb more easily onto his shoulders, Ratonhnhake:ton grunted as his hair was pulled by the toddler wrapped around his arm like a snake.

"Be gentle," he warned, "she is like a sister to me."

The little girl nodded, her face solemn, and gently stroked between the horse's flaring nostrils, so light she was barely touching the skin. Akweks promptly sneezed, startling a giggle from her. "She's beautiful!" the girl said, looking up at him with shining eyes.


"Children! Enough!" called out a familiar voice. Looking over his shoulder, careful not to jostle the boy too much, Ratonhnhake:ton's smile widened. Walking towards him were Oia:ner and his cousins, Kahionhatenion and Teiowi:sonte.

"Cousin," called out Kahionhatenion, holding up a hand, "it is good to see you. It's been too long since we last saw you."

"We were beginning to worry that the white men had eaten you up," said Teiowi:sonte teasingly. Ratonhnhake:ton smiled and shrugged carefully. "Almost," he replied, "it was a close thing. If I hadn't left when I did, I would have completely forgotten how to properly walk through the forest."

Teiowi:sonte laughed and nudged his brother. "You still may have," he said. "I think you need to be tested before we can make any real statement."

Ratonhnhake:ton raised an eyebrow. "And this has nothing to do with some bet the two of you have
going on, right?” he asked dryly, looking between the two of them. The overly-offended gasps that they made were all the answer he needed. Shaking his head, he allowed one cousin to pull the boy off of his shoulders and the other scatter the children petting his horse.

"Where is Uncle?” Ratonhnhake:ton asked. "I wanted to speak to him before supper tonight."

"Out,” said Kahionhatenion. "Talking to the warriors about something. He's pretty much the same as always,” he added. "Grim and humourless. Kanen'to:kon's up by the mouth of the river, by the way; he's been looking for you."

Ratonhnhake:ton's stomach dropped along with his smile. Right. Kanen'to:kon. The reason he had begged his father to come out here. From the looks of concern on his relatives' faces, his sudden drop in mood had been noticed.

Summoning his smile back up again, he tried to re-balance himself. "Thank you,” he said. "I have been looking forward to talking to him again. Would you mind taking care of Akweks?” he asked, handing the bridle over to Kahionhatenion.

The other man nodded, clearly not buying his smile but respecting his privacy. He and his brother strode away, casually talking about some sort of hunting competition, leaving Ratonhnhake:ton and Oia:ner alone.

"You have much on your mind," said his grandmother, leaning heavily on her staff.

"When have I not?” he joked gently.

She did not smile. She only looked sad at his humour. "I remember a time like that,” she said quietly, reaching up to cup his cheek with one wrinkled hand. "I remember when the world was filled with only beauty and goodness for you.” She blinked slowly, studying him carefully. Ratonhnhake:ton stood still, allowing her inspection. He remembered those times too.

"Come speak with me at my longhouse after you are done with Kanen'to:kon," she said, letting her hand drop. Ratonhnhake:ton could feel its warmth against his skin still, and had to quell the urge to touch his cheek. "I wish to speak with you about the future of our people."

Ratonhnhake:ton nodded solemnly. Another worry, but one he took gladly. His people were his first love, and they would always occupy a place in his heart and mind. He watched as she turned and began to hobble away, heading towards a heavily-pregnant woman who was struggling to corral some of the children that had just been petting Akweks.

He had been away for too long. And now, heading towards the mouth of the river that ran alongside the village, he found his steps dragging. He did not want to have to have a talk with Kanen'to:kon. He wanted to sit by the fire and mend nets, or go hunting with his cousins. He wanted to be Ratonhnhake:ton. But now, with Kanen'to:kon what he was, he had to be Connor for a little while longer, it seemed.

Slipping through the trees, he set foot on the large, smooth rocks that surrounded the river and looked up, his breath catching in his throat. There was Kanen'to:kon, sitting at the top of the falls with a pensive look on his face.

Connor thought that he was more handsome than before, when he was wearing that awful hood. His hair neatly parted and braided, clad in the skins of their people, he belonged in a way that he didn't with the Assassins. There was no discomfort or awkwardness in his muscular frame, nor shyness or submission in his expression. Only the proud thoughtfulness of their people.
Connor did not want to disturb him. He was content to stand there for the rest of the evening, drinking the sight in. But then his - friend? - stirred and noticed him.

"Ratonhnhake:ton," he said, a smile just barely curving his lips. "It's nice to see you. I wasn't sure that you would come."

Connor swallowed. "The same to you," he replied, starting forward to climb up the rocks so that he could sit beside Kanen'to:kon. The rock was cool and rough underneath his fingers, still chilled in the spring air despite the sun beaming down at them. Kanen'to:kon had chosen his seat well, being in the sun but with the shadow of a tree falling on him, keeping him from getting too hot. Branches blocked the village from sight, making it feel as if they were in the middle of the forest, miles from anyone else. Settling down beside him, Connor leaned back and studied his hunched-over figure.

Now that he wasn't bundled up in winter clothing, Connor could see the muscle that lined his old friend's body. There was no hint of fat underneath his shirt like there had been while they were growing up; even the feathers in his hair were different, pointing the opposite way and banded with brown. His throat tightened at that.

So much had changed over the years. And he was not sure if he liked that.

They sat in silence for several minutes, just listening to the river flow. Finally, though, Kanen'to:kon seemed to be unable to take it anymore.

"I am sorry," he said.

Connor looked at him in surprise. "For what?"

"For Aveline knocking you unconscious after the death of the Hessian."

Connor raised an eyebrow. "I did not think that you would be sorry for that," he said, just a little cool.

Kanen'to:kon frowned, looking hurt. "Aveline had her reasons," he said, his tone matching Connor's, "directly related to you were staring at the Apple like it contained all the answers in the world after forcing someone to slit their own throat." His lips tightened as Connor looked at him in disbelief. "That is very nearly a direct quote."

Connor scowled as well, looking away and into the rushing water in front of them.

Kanen'to:kon was not able to keep frowning for long. Sighing, he leaned back and braced his hands on the rock underneath him, brushing shoulders with Connor and sending a jolt up his spine.

"Listen," he said, his tone careful as if he was handling a delicate piece of china, "Aveline is...sensitive to people using Apples in such a manner. I cannot tell you why - that is her own story, but she does have her reasons, and they are good ones."

"A pity that she cannot be bothered to explain herself," Connor snapped, "or was she just mimicking her Mentor in her high-handedness?"

Kanen'to:kon glared and opened his mouth. "In case you forget," he said heatedly, "I am a part of the Assassins as well -"

"And yet we seem to be capable of getting along and speaking to one another clearly, rather than sneaking up and knocking the other unconscious -"

"Ratonhnhake:ton -"
"We were fine working together, and yet as soon as things were done she stole the Apple and left me there!" Connor was aware that he was nearly shouting and could not bring himself to care. "How long was she planning that? Did the two of you speak when I was sleeping, planning to abandon me to whomever might come along next?"

"Ratonhnhake:ton!" Kanen'to:kon snapped, grabbing his shoulders. "What has gotten into you? Where has this paranoia come from?"

Looking into his friends eyes, Connor could only see sincere concern. And that only stoked the embers of anger in his stomach into a roaring bonfire.

"Paranoia?" he growled, gripping one of the other man's wrists, "It is not paranoia to consider that perhaps your friend who you trusted may not be trustworthy anymore once they start defending the woman that left me lying unconscious in hostile territory. If someone had come by -" He choked, he throat closing in a mixture of anger, embarassment and tears.

He had trusted Kanen'to:kon. And after the cave, where he had seen Aveline's actions towards him, he had begun to think that maybe she was not as bad as she first seemed. Maybe she was not one of the deluded, murderous Assassins he had known as a child and a young man. But then she had left him defenceless, knowing that von Statten had been waiting for others to come and join him. And now Kanen'to:kon was here in front of him, spewing excuses for her actions, defending her for leaving an ally, temporary perhaps but still an ally, behind.

"What is your relationship with the Assassin, Kanen'to:kon?" he blurted out.

Kanen'to:kon hesitated, and Connor knew.

He let his hand slip from the other man's wrist, pulling away from the hands still on his shoulders. "I see," he said. He knew that it was ridiculous. That the two of them had split paths years ago, not promising anything to each other with the knowledge that their different roads may not allow them to even stay in contact, let alone keep up the relationship that they had enjoyed. But to be so completely cast aside in someone's affections...

Connor stood up, brushing himself off. "I should not have come here," he said, swallowing his anger and hurt like he had been taught to. "This was a mistake."

Beside him, Kanen'to:kon stood up as well, fiddling with one of his braids. At his words, he let his hands drop and reach out towards Connor, hovering as if too frightened to touch him.

"Ratonhnhake:ton..." he said, his voice helpless. Connor could not bring himself to care.

"I will be staying for the rest of the summer," he said, not looking at the other man. "I do not believe that it would be good for us to speak again."

"Ratonhnhake:ton, please, don't," Kanen'to:kon pleaded. "I am not your enemy - if you could just understand why Aveline did it -"

"Why?" Connor snapped, whirling on him. "How can I understand if all you do is dance around the answer? I am not the one who has spent the last few years learning how to murder from my best friend's family's enemies! I am not the one who said nothing all those years! I gave you an address to send letters to, all you would have had to do was pick up a quill!" Connor could feel his eyes burning. "But you didn't! Instead you let me bumble along and believe that we were still friends, all the while working for our people's enemies and laughing at my foolishness -"

"I have never laughed at you!" Kanen'to:kon shouted back, his chin quivering. "Never! You are my
friend, my brother, the first in my heart! I only wanted to save you, like the Star Woman warned me to -"

"Save me? From what?!"

The crack of gunshots rang through the air, one after the other, like the fireworks Connor's father had once taken him to see. Both of their heads immediately snapped around to the village, their argument forgotten.

Another round of shots rang out, and now they could hear screams floating through the air.

Without a word, they bolted back towards their home together, shoulder to shoulder.

Smoke clogged the air, making Ratonhnhake:ton's lungs burn and eyes water. His people were screaming, running, being chased by white men carrying weapons. One ran past him in pursuit of a screaming woman carrying a child, laughing.

He wanted to chase after them. But his feet wouldn't move. The fire licked up the walls of the longhouse, their heat pressing in against him until it felt like the flames were crawling down his throat. His mother was trapped in front of him, her face bloody, begging him to leave. But he couldn't! He couldn't leave without her -

A hand cracked across his face, and Ratonhnhake:ton blinked. The village was still on fire. He wasn't in a longhouse with Ista anymore, though. Ista had been dead for years.

Kanen'to:kon was staring at him, his tomahawk in his hand and a concerned look on his face.

"Sorry," Ratonhnhake:ton said, his hands trembling. He distractedly patted at his belt, looking for a weapon. With the fear banished from his head, he could see what was going on more clearly now.

White men, colonists, were attacking the village like when he was four years old. Unlike then, though, they weren't wearing uniforms. Dressed like ragged frontiersmen, they laughed as they ran after Ratonhnhake:ton's screaming friends and family. Fires licked up the sides of the longhouses and danced through the fields, filling the air with smoke and heat. It was like that day all over again, and it made Ratonhnhake:ton's insides shake like a leaf.

One man came particularly close, and Kanen'to:kon's tomahawk lashed out like a streak of lightning, slitting his throat so smoothly that the man ran several steps more before falling to the ground, dead.

The sight of his friend's muscular arm shook the last vestiges of terror from Ratonhnhake:ton's mind, sweeping it away like dust from a floor. Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and centered himself in the here and now. He was no longer four years old, helpless to save the person he loved most in this world. He would not let any more of his people die at the colonists' hands.

"Are you alright?" Kanen'to:kon asked from beside him, his head whipping around to take in the chaos. Ratonhnhake:ton swallowed and nodded.

"Do what you must," he said. "I have to retrieve my weapons; then we will drive the invaders back."

Kanen'to:kon just nodded quickly and darted off, already chasing after another attacker. Ratonhnhake:ton turned away and began to run as well, towards his family's longhouse. That was where Kahionhatenion and Teiowi:sonte would have put his weapons.
Bursting through the door, he had to steady himself again under the assault of his memories. His mother, trapped underneath the longhouse's burning timbers and screaming at him to run - but no. No. He was not helpless - he would get his weapons and drive back the invaders before something like that happened again.

A scream, too familiar yet unfamiliar, spiked through his ears. His heart began to pound in his ears. He looked around wildly, his eyes watering from the smoke.

There. Kneeling on the ground, her arms held above her head and one grey braid torn loose of its bindings, was Oia:ner. Above her loomed a man, his teeth gleaming red in the firelight and a hand tangled in her hair. His hand, curled into a fist, was raised above his head and as Ratonhnhake:ton watched he brought it down again and again and again against her old flesh -

Something snapped in Ratonhnhake:ton and he howled.

Hurling himself forward, he ignored the smoke and embers that clung to his clothes. The man barely had time to look up and widen his eyes before Ratonhnhake:ton was upon him, digging his hands into his flesh.

The first blow broke the man's nose. The second blow knocked the man to the ground, his jaw distorting from the force. Then Ratonhnhake:ton was on his knees and straddling him, burying his knuckles into his face like he was trying to hit the ground underneath them, again and again and again until the blood from the man's gaping red hole of a mouth flecked his face and someone was dragging him off of him. Ratonhnhake:ton struggled, the sound of his heart beating like a war drum in his ears and rage wrapped tight around his chest. Who was stopping him! Who would stop him from saving his -

Pain exploded across the side of his face, shocking him into stillness and silencing the drums. His uncle Otetieni stood in front of him, gripping his arms tightly and staring down at him with concern in his eyes.

"He's dead, Ratonhnhake:ton," he said, squeezing his biceps a little tighter. "Oia:ner is safe."

His muscles jumping underneath his skin, Ratonhnhake:ton looked over his uncle's shoulder. Relief pooled in his chest as he spotted his grandmother, supported by Teiowi:sonte and being led away from him, away from the fire.

Another shake from his uncle dragged his attention back to the man in front of him.

"Ratonhnhake:ton," Otetieni said, "we need to leave, now. Come with me -"

"No," he replied automatically, shaking his head, "I can't, I need to find my weapons -"

"Weapons can be replaced -"

"No!" Ratonhnhake:ton shouted, knocking his hands away. "No," he said, a little softer. "This is not about greed - it is cover our retreat. I am not weak anymore, I can fight -" he stopped, a lump forming in his throat. Looking up pleadingly at the older man, he willed him to understand.

For a long second, Otetieni's eyes were hard, and Ratonhnhake:ton thought that he wouldn't budge. But then they softened just a little.

"Alright," he said. "But Ratonhnhake:ton, please," he said, staring deep into his eyes, "please remember that you still have family. Don't be a hero; come back to us."
Ratonhnhake:ton placed a hand over his uncle's and squeezed.

"I will," he promised.

His uncle stared at him for a moment, looking oddly sad. Then he turned, and with one last lingering look at him, he ran out the door after Oianer and his son, already shouting orders to the others outside.

Turning back to his original goal, Ratonhnhake:ton scanned the still-burning longhouse. There - exactly where he thought they would be. His pistols and knives, just peeking out of his pack on top of his bed. He darted forward through the smoke and embers, yanking the weapons out and quickly sliding them into his belt.

There was the loud crack of gunfire outside. Ratonhnhake:ton swore and pulled out his last weapon, his tomahawk, from his pack. Above him, the roof creaked dangerously as the roar of the flames got louder. Smoke clogging his throat, he raced outside.

Fire had almost completely consumed the village. Longhouses, black from the flames that now outlined them against the smoke-darkened sky, were crumbling with great crashes. Bodies of people Ratonhnhake:ton had known lay on the ground, splayed and coated with blood and dirt with their eyes opened wide and unseeing. There was the woman who had slept on the bed opposite of him and his mother when he was small, her hair now half-covering her face and matted with blood. The man who had taught him how to skin a hare, his mouth smeared with the blood that was also staining his front.

A voice rose above the screams that still filled the air, swollen with triumph and arrogance. Snapping his head around, Ratonhnhake:ton bared his teeth as he spotted the speaker.

Standing between two burning longhouses was a man. Dressed like he was expecting to entertain someone in a parlour than hike through the woods, a drooping mustache covering his upper face, the man was looking down at something he was holding in his hands and smiling.

Ratonhnhake:ton snarled like a wolf. Raising his tomahawk above his head, he charged forward. How dare that man smile while Ratonhnhake:ton's world burned for a second time.

The man looked up when Ratonhnhake:ton was just a few feet away. His smile widened, and Ratonhnhake:ton suddenly noticed that his eyes were different colours; one an icy blue, the other an eagle's gold. And then he saw what was in the man's hands.

Their tribe's sacred artifact. The crystal ball.

Golden light streamed the designs that had been carved into its surface, reaching out towards him and winding around him like so many steel ropes as they hoisted him into the air. His arms and legs, fingers and toes - he couldn't move a muscle under that strange golden light. Below him, the man's smile transformed into a grin and he held the ball up higher.

The light got brighter. The ropes that had wound around him thickened and crawled over his body, burning his skin and wrapping around Ratonhnhake:ton's head as well before they began to squeeze.

He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. The ropes just got tighter until he thought that his head would crack open, spilling his brain onto the ground like so many others of his tribe. But then the ropes began to squirm inside of his head, wriggling and twisting until his head was agony and he couldn't think -
Ratonhnhake:ton felt something wet trickle down his face. And then he knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand that's a wrap! Thank you to everybody that commented and encouraged me to keep writing, it really got me through the doldrums, even when I didn't reply.

Anyways, I'm still blocking scenes out for the sequel, so it might be a while, but I do fully intend to write and post the fic! So stay tuned for part three of the Templar Connor series, "Hang Together"!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!