

# Bleeding Brotherhood

Von Peacer

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## Kapitel 1: Ezio Auditore, 1502-1503

From his higher viewpoint, Ezio observed the surrounding city and took notice of all the important buildings, heralds and guards running around in a panic after he had killed their general, memorizing everything and adding it to his mental map of Rome. Then he took the torch and set the tower aflame.

He felt the fire at his back, trying to get to him as he jumped upon the little wall of the tower, took aim and performed a leap of faith into the hay below. He stayed a few seconds until he was sure all the guards were too busy dealing with the fire and the mob that started to openly oppose them, now that he had given the starting signal, before he rolled out of the hay, brushed his robe off and wandered off to mingle with the crowd and judge their mood.

It was not long before the citizens of Rome started to drive the guards off and reclaim their lost territory. They had been suppressed for a long time now and the little spark that Ezio had provided had been enough to set them off and finally start fighting to get their lives back.

His work here was nearly done. He would only linger long enough to make sure that the civilians didn't have any problems dealing with the guards, that his help wasn't needed anymore. Then he would return to Tiber Island and retire for today. It wouldn't be long before the sun disappeared behind the buildings after all and he'd done enough mayhem for today.

Just when Ezio was satisfied that the citizens could handle it and had started to make his way home, he heard shouting and the distinct noise of fighting. He stopped for a moment to listen, glanced around and decided that the fastest way was over the rooftops. A moment later he was scaling the wall, ignoring the murmuring of the astonished crowd, and after making sure there were no archers waiting for him, pulled himself onto the building.

A second later he was perched on the edge on the other side and glanced down at the commotion that had lured him here. Four guards were pointing their swords at a young woman who had her back pressed against the wall and only wielded a knife. He wondered how she had managed to fend them off with her meagre defence, but that question was answered a second later when one guard came a step too close and swiftly received a slash across his arm for his trouble.

Ezio raised an eyebrow, impressed. She definitely knew how to wield her weapon. "Puttana! You will pay for this!" cursed the hurt guard and waved his sword in a manner that he probably thought was intimidating, but only showed how little skill he had with the weapon. The Assassin was not the only one to notice this.

The woman smirked and held her knife in front of her, in a perfectly balanced ice-pick grip. "I'd like to see you try, stronzo."

As much as it amused Ezio to watch the woman rile the guards, she was still hopelessly outmatched and at a great disadvantage against swords with their much longer reach. He had to intervene before she got hurt. After all, it wouldn't do to neglect a damsel in distress, even more since he really liked to play the knight in shining armour.

He readied his two hidden blades and after a last, calculating look, he dropped down on the unsuspecting guards. Two were dead before they even knew what had hit them, another was quickly disposed of with a slash across the throat, not even having

enough time to raise his sword in defence. The last one fled from the scene, terrified. "Well, that was quite effective."

Ezio let his blades disappear and turned around, his trademark charming smile in place which he always wore when dealing with women, a witty retort on the tip of his tongue – and promptly forgot it when he really saw the woman he had just saved for the first time.

It wasn't that she was exceptionally beautiful. Ezio had met many women that were far more beautiful than her in his lifetime and he had never been shy around those. She had her dark hair tied in a knot, as was the common style at the time, and brown eyes. The typical Italian woman, as there were hundreds wandering the streets of Rome, maybe a bit prettier than most, but nothing remarkable. Except for the smile which had managed to rattle him, him, the master of smiles. It was sweet, so very sweet, and so alike to Cristina's it hurt.

He had his long training of hiding his true emotions to thank when he didn't let his thoughts show and that it took him less than a second to automatically fall into his familiar role as a heartbreaker. Even a very keen observer would have had trouble noticing his short faltering.

"I am effective in everything I do, signorina," he said and let his gaze wander over her body, lingering for a moment at the ample cleavage her form fitting bodice showed before he caught her gaze again. His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Are you alright?"

"You made sure of that, signore. Grazie." Her playful tone revealed that she didn't talk about the guards and his smile grew just a little bit wider as she dropped a curtsy. He liked her answer and the fact that the movement let her cleavage show just a little bit more. "How will I ever be able to repay your kindness?"

Ezio had some distinct ideas about that, but for once he didn't give into the temptation. He had more important issues to deal with, one being the building of the Brotherhood. And if her expertise with the knife was any indication, she just might become a pretty apt recruit. The fact that she wasn't an eyesore was of course a bonus.

"There is no debt to be repaid, signorina. I did what any man would do when seeing a pretty damsel in distress." He couldn't help the flirting. It was as much a part of him as his hidden blade. But then he grew more serious as he laid a hand on her shoulder. "But if you are willing to join our cause, to help in the liberation of Roma, we would gladly welcome you."

She bowed her head, a hand over her heart, becoming serious the moment he did. "I still breathe, thanks to you. What skill I have is yours."

"And it is gladly accepted. Come and we'll officially make you into a recruit." He smiled, the serious part of the recruiting over. "I am Ezio Auditore da Firenze," he said with a slight bow and the new recruit respectfully nodded her head.

"My name is Veronica Acerbi. I'm honoured to make your acquaintance, signore Auditore."

It had been some time since Ezio started dwindling away at the Borgia influence in Rome. He'd already killed half a dozen of their generals and set their towers aflame, giving hope back to the people, as well as the will to think for themselves. He'd sponsored shops and the renovation of structures to show that Rome was on the uprise again, that the reign of the Borgia was coming to an end, and he had found many willing Assassin recruits during that time who wanted revenge on those that had suppressed them.

Those men and women were standing before him now, awaiting his orders. They all wore the white Assassin robes that designed them as novices, had a sword at their side and the arm protector with the hidden blade on their wrists. Some wore other weapons they had shown to be skilled with, such as crossbows or maces, and one even had a bow. He knew that some had knives on them, even if they were hidden from sight. His scrutinizing gaze shortly lingered on the form of Veronica whose curvy body was unfortunately covered by the same bulky robes everyone wore and she held his gaze, a small smile on her lips.

His gaze moved on. "Apprentices, you've come a long way in the last months." The guild leaders, Machiavelli and he, on occasion had made sure of that and had trained them in combat, free running, pickpocketing, blending and, of course, the use of their hidden blade. All of them had shown talent in at least one skill and stubbornness in learning all the other skills that hadn't come as easy. Some of them had more talent than the others, but all of them had made a great deal of progress and more than earned their title of Recluta.

Now it was time to put their new skills to good use. "But learning the necessary skills is only the first step in becoming a real assassin. The next step is to learn how to use them and help in furthering the cause of our order. Therefore, from now on, you will be sent on missions."

A low murmur went through the little group of novices, some excited, some nervous, but most curious as to what their new assignments would be. Ezio smiled, ready to indulge them. "This will help to further improve your skills and let you gain some first-hand combat experience. You will be divided in teams under one assigned leader, which may change depending on the mission."

The murmuring got a bit louder as the assassins began to wonder who had earned the honour of being granted the title of leader. Ezio glanced over at Machiavelli, who got the sign and came to stand by his side, some papers in hand.

Ezio waved his hand in the direction of the older assassin. "Master Machiavelli will discuss the details with you and you will start your respective missions tomorrow morning." He looked them in the eyes, then placed his hand on his heart and slightly bowed his head. "Nothing is true, everything is permitted."

"Nothing is true, everything is permitted!" echoed it across the hall and Ezio turned to go, satisfied, while the assassins, clearly dismissed, began to swarm around Machiavelli.

"Already off again?" Well, all but one, apparently.

He turned back to Veronica, the smile he only reserved for pretty women already in place. "I've done my part, the rest is up to Machiavelli. And you recruits, of course. Nothing holds me here." His eyes glinted as he watched her. "Or is there?"

Veronica came closer and brushed some imaginary dust off his breast plate. "Well, there might be", she drawled and leaned a bit closer, a seductive smile on her face.

He couldn't resist drawing a bit closer himself and letting his hand trail innocently down her side before it came to rest on her hip. Her hand had wandered from his chest to his neck where she played with his hair and there was not much space between them. He fully intended to close the remaining distance between them when she suddenly pulled back and left him a bit dumbfounded.

"But unfortunately, our master assassin instructed that I leave early tomorrow and I would hate to be tired on my very first mission. You will have to wait until I'm back." She patted his cheek and with a twinkle in her brown eyes, turned around and returned to Machiavelli, leaving him alone in his slight stupor.

It had been quite some time since someone had left him standing like that, long enough that he struggled a little bit to understand the situation. But when he did, the smile returned full blast. If she wanted to play this game, he would indulge her.

And he would win because he always did.

With his thoughts circulating around his new object of interest, he left the hideout to scout some more, vaguely realizing how very similar this courting was to that of Cristina nearly three decades prior.

But he found he didn't care.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and focus on his mission and then he took off into the descending night of Roma.

Ezio mingled in the crowd, observing the four guards standing before the door across the street. He'd come to learn that most of the time someone guarding a door like that meant that behind it a Codex page, or at least a worthy treasure could be found. He may have already found all the pages his ancestor Altair had left him, but nonetheless he would not let the opportunity pass to get his hands on some much needed money to further help rebuild Rome.

He let his eyes wander while proceeding a bit further up the street with the people he used as cover, until he found what he had been looking for: a group of thieves, lingering in the corner, looking for their newest victim.

He approached them and gladly realized that at least two of them saw him coming. Observant, a good trait to have as a thief and spy for the assassins.

"Messer Ezio," greeted the oldest looking thief whose dark hair had some white streaks interwoven, and who had first seen him, while the others just nodded.

"Good afternoon. How is the business going?"

The old thief, clearly the unspoken leader of the group, answered with a shrug. "Pretty slow."

Another who wore a green bandana and looked slightly younger than the other three added with a cocky grin, "but you seem to have work for us, right, Messere?"

Ezio smiled. "Indeed." He pointed at the group of guards he had observed earlier. "I would be much obliged if you could distract them for me."

"Nessun problema, Messere. Consider it done," answered the leader and took the coins Ezio handed over with a slight bow.

"Don't take any unnecessary risks," Ezio cautioned, "I'll only need a moment."

The thieves nodded and walked off towards the guards, while Ezio followed them at a safe distance, again blending in with the crowd and waiting for his opportunity.

Once the thieves had managed to provoke the guards enough to make them forget their duty and abandon their post to chase them down the street, Ezio made his way over to the door, opened it just enough to slip through and closed it behind him. No need to leave open evidence that someone had broken in.

Then he glanced around the room and a grin lit up his face when he spotted the big treasure box that was sure to hold a fortune. He immediately pulled out his lock picks and got to work. It didn't take long for the box to open up; the lock had been the same for years and it would probably never change. If they hadn't learned by now that it wasn't safe enough to keep him out, they never would.

Gingerly he picked up the two precious looking diamonds that lay on top of the little fortune and put them in a pocket on the inside of his robe. He recalled that his favourite Blacksmith had asked for these in exchange for making him even better armour, so it wouldn't do to lose them now. Then he swiftly filled up his money pouch

to the point of bursting, already thinking about all the investments he could make with this.

Mission accomplished he made to leave the room – and stopped, a hand already on the door handle. He heard voices on the outside and his instinct told him to take care. Even civilians didn't like to be hit by doors, and he had a feeling these weren't civilians lurking just behind the door.

He pressed his ear to the door and the next words he heard confirmed his suspicion. "I tell you, they won't catch them. The thieves are way too fast and know the streets better than any of us. Better stay here before the captain scolds us for leaving our post on a fool's errand."

It seemed the guards had become smarter. It wouldn't matter though, as they wouldn't live long enough to brag about it.

Ezio readied his two hidden blades and kicked open the door. There was a time for silent assassinations. This was not it.

As planned, the door hit the two perfectly placed guards right in their backs. It may not have hurt them all that much thanks to their armour, but it stunned them for a moment, which was all Ezio needed. His two blades branded, he jumped the guards and slit their throats before they even knew what had hit them.

As they crumbled to the floor, he cleaned his blades on their trousers and let them slide back, hidden once more before the surrounding crowd could see them. Not that they needed to recognize him. The white robes with the assassin seal were a dead giveaway all on their own, as was the fact that he was standing over two bodies.

"Assassino!"

The terrified scream came not a second later as the people scrambled to put as much distance as possible between them and him. Not that he cared all that much. He looked around to make sure there were no other guards in sight and then bent down to pick up the throwing knives, bullets and some florin from the bodies. He'd need those more than them, after all.

He put his newly acquired supplies in the designed pouches and then started to make his way down the street, the crowd parting before him, afraid he might kill them too. It eased his progress, but it had own fatal disadvantage: he stood out like a black sheep among his white brethren.

And of course a patrol chose that moment to come around the corner and spotted him in an instant. With the people screaming Assassino and keeping their distance from him, it wasn't all that hard for them to make the connection.

"Get him!" ordered the leader of the group and charged, his sword already branded. Ezio thought for only a moment, then turned around and fled down the street, the guards hot on his heels and the crowd parting before him, not wanting to get in the crossfire.

He ducked into a narrow alley and pushed an unsuspecting couple out of his way and into the path of the following guards which gained him some much needed time. Still not enough, though. As he sprinted around the next corner, two of the four guards still followed him close enough to not lose sight of him, so he was unable to lose them using that basic tactic. At least he'd gotten rid of the two Brutes, which had been the main reason to flee instead of fighting. Even he had trouble going against those all on his own.

Another sharp turn and Ezio found himself on a busy main street. He smiled a little and, still running at full speed, grabbed the pouch holding his money and fished out some florin, which he then tossed in a nice arc right behind him. "A little donation for

the good citizens of Roma," he called as the crowd practically threw itself on the money lying on the ground, and thus effectively blocked the way of the guards. Not even their cursing and shouting of orders could convince them to back off; the call of the money was simply too strong.

Grinning, Ezio took the opportunity and swiftly ducked into another alley where he proceeded to skilfully climb the facade. They'd never get him once he reached the roofs - they were his territory after all.

Well, his and that of the archers stationed there.

"You're not supposed to be here. Get down." The archer menacingly reached for his weapon the moment Ezio pulled himself over the ledge and onto the roof. Today seemed to be his lucky day.

He held up his hands in surrender. "I'll get down, no need to draw that weapon." He came a bit closer while the guard regarded him suspiciously. Ezio waved to the street below and winked conspiratorially. "I just needed to get away from a crowd of women who would not stop following me, you see." He sighed dramatically as he took another step closer. The guard let go of his bow and instead gripped the hilt of his sword, not yet drawing it, but a clear warning to stay away nonetheless. Ezio ignored it. "Sometimes it is a curse to be this handsome," he winked, but the guard remained stoic.

Ezio tensed and before his opponent even realized the change in his composure and could draw the sword, the Assassin jumped him and stabbed his hidden blade deep into his throat.

As the guard went down, Ezio shrugged. "Not that you could relate." He sighed, then knelt next to the guard to close his eyes. "Requiscat in Pace."

His final duty done, he looked up to the sky to see that the sun was already well on its way west and that it wouldn't be long before night fell upon Roma. He wouldn't have any more luck today gathering information about the location of the Templar agents so he might as well get back to the hideout now and get an early start tomorrow. Decision made he started his travel back across the rooftops, this time making sure to stay out of sight of the archers.

"Any success?"

Ezio shook his head as he fell into the seat across from Machiavelli and began to undo his arm protectors. "Niente. It seems they've gotten a bit more careful after I killed the last two." He leaned forward, observing his friend. "What about you? Any word from our allies?"

Machiavelli also shook his head and sighed. "They're doing all they can, but it's a slow progress."

"A bit too slow for my taste," Ezio complained, but leaned back in his seat, showing that the topic was closed. They couldn't change the situation either way. Patience was a virtue. He waved his hand in the direction of the corner where a list of the current missions across the continent hung. "How are our recruits doing?"

Machiavelli leaned back and a little smile crossed his face for a moment. Ezio knew the news would be good before his friend had even opened his mouth. "They're performing very well, actually," he said proudly, and rightfully so, since he had helped train them. Even more than Ezio had, busy as he was with his own agenda. "Francesco just sent a report that he and his team succeeded in ambushing and eliminating the troops before they reached Camerino, all without losing a single man. They're on their way back now."

Ezio nodded, glad. He knew how skilled Francesco was and that it had been the right choice to make him the leader of his team, but it was always nice to see one's expectations fulfilled. A real mission was something different from a training session, after all. It seemed the young man was well on his way to becoming a great assassin and leader. He was curious to hear how his teammates had performed, but that would have to wait until their return.

"Lodovico and his team were also successful at their missions in Florence. They split up to sneak into a guard meeting to get information on their numbers and patrol routes, deliver false records concerning the Templars finances and steal an important letter from a Templar courier."

"Seems they're quite the stealthy ones," commented Ezio and Machiavelli nodded, that small smile still on his lips. He really was mighty pleased with the success of their newly founded Brotherhood.

"It was Lodovico's objective to gather a team specialized in staying in the shadows." A bit risky since most went for a pretty balanced team with more than one speciality, but it seemed to work out, so Ezio sure as hell wouldn't object. He waved for Machiavelli to continue, which he did without further ado. It wasn't all that often that he could deliver so much good news.

"Veronica and her team went to Aquila to assist in the escape of an assassin that had been found out. They should be back tomorrow."

Ezio couldn't help but give his thoughts on that. "That is good news indeed," he commented with a big grin that had Machiavelli rolling his eyes, just as expected. The man just didn't have the appreciation for pretty women that Ezio had. He seemed to prefer books, something that Ezio would never understand.

Before Machiavelli could reply, a female voice interrupted them. "And here I thought I would save the day with my good news."

Both men got up from their chairs and turned to the confident young woman striding into the room, her pretty red dress billowing behind her.

"Claudia," Ezio said simply, while Machiavelli silently bowed to the rather new Madame of the courtesans of Rome, a responsibility which she handled all too well. Even though Ezio was glad to have such a reliable ally, he was still a bit peeved that his sister had ignored his order to go to Florence and taken on this role against his will. Still, she held her own pretty well, stubborn as she was. A true Auditore.

"Ezio. It's been a while." She glared at him, and he held up his hands, partly in defence, partly as an unspoken apology. It was true that he didn't visit her all that often, even though she wasn't that far off. He may have told her that she was on her own, but she was still his sister and right in her rebuttal, even if he didn't like to admit it. He should at least stop by to see their mother.

"I was busy, as were you, it seems. What did your girls find out?" He redirected the conversation in a much safer direction while simultaneously hiding an apology and a compliment in there to placate her.

It seemed to work as she uncrossed her arms. "They said a senator, Egidio Troche, owes the Banker money and that he is not very happy with the way things are in Roma. He might be the way into his inner circle you have been looking for."

"That is indeed good news," Machiavelli echoed Ezio's earlier words, but the Assassin was already too deep in thoughts to catch the mocking tone of his friend. Anyone that owed the Banker money was in trouble, and if he helped this senator, he might finally get closer to the Templar. Either way, it was the best lead he had so far, and he would be stupid to let this opportunity pass. The sooner he managed to get Cesare's funds

cut off, the better.

"Where can I find him?"

"When he isn't at the Rosa, most of the time he's in the Campidoglio."

Ezio nodded, his decision made. "Then I will pay him a visit tomorrow. I shall retire for tonight."

Claudia smiled, their rather rough welcome already forgotten. "Good luck, brother."

"Nothing is true, everything is permitted," said Machiavelli as goodbye and after a curt nod in the direction of Claudia, retreated to the small library of the hideout.

Ezio himself made his way in the opposite direction where the quarters were just up a short flight of stairs. He rounded the corner – and crashed into a recruit who would have fallen to the ground if it hadn't been for Ezio's fast reaction into grabbing his shoulder. Or hers, as her voice let on when she quickly apologised. "I'm sorry, Messere. I didn't pay attention."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Didn't I teach you that an assassin should always be aware of his surroundings?" He mocked and to his delight managed to make Veronica blush.

She grinned, a little embarrassed but shaking it off quickly enough to adapt her usual flirty tone. "I guess I felt a bit too comfortable. After all, what could happen to me with a Master Assassin like you here?"

Ezio's eyes glinted as he slowly let his fingers trail down her arm. "Oh, I know a thing or two," he replied, a predatory smile on his face as his fingers came to rest at her hand which he lightly gripped, so she could still pull it away if she wanted.

She didn't. "Now you made me curious," she said with that smile that he liked so much. "And as a gentleman it is my duty to satisfy that curiosity, isn't it?" He gently tucked her in the direction of the quarters and she easily followed him. As they made their way up the stairs, he couldn't help his next comment. "It is indeed my lucky day. Machiavelli didn't expect you back until tomorrow."

"I was eager to come back, so I made haste. And aren't I the lucky one, to have run into you right after my arrival?" She easily flirted back.

Ezio simply smiled as his opened the door to his designed chambers. "I think we will both be much luckier in a moment."

Veronica followed him in and closed the door, which wasn't opened again until the next morning.

## Kapitel 2: Desmond Miles, 2012

Desmond nearly fell over the cables lying on the floor in his haste to get out of the Animus. His fuzzy vision after his time in the machine and getting up a little too fast wasn't helping matters either. "Cazzo," he cursed as he held his head while Lucy hovered nearby, worried and ready to jump to the rescue should he decide he wanted to get to know the floor a little better after all.

"Is cursing in Italian your way of showing you're sophisticated now? If so, I am sorry to inform you that it isn't working," Shaun informed him drily from his place, his eyes not once leaving the desktop in front of him.

"Are you alright?" Lucy asked, ever worried about pushing him too hard, even though all of them knew how important Demond's task was and that they needed to find the Apple as soon as possible. But he guessed it was normal to worry after witnessing what had happened to Sixteen - and he would really hate to end up like that.

"Fine. I just didn't want to relive another of Ezio's one-night stands."

"And here I thought that was the best part of all," Shaun commented absentmindedly while typing away at his keyboard.

Desmond snorted. "It's like seeing your grandparents have sex, only worse, because you're kinda participating."

That finally made Shaun turn around to face him. "Thank you, Desmond, for that lovely image," he said, his hands folded in front of his chest and bowed his head. "I'll make sure to find a way to pay you back."

Rebecca snickered. "I think he's just jealous that you're the only one that still has some kind of love life, even if it only is in a weird, virtual way."

"Yeah, that really is something to be jealous of," Shaun replied with an eye roll and turned back to his desktop, apparently deeming the conversation unworthy of his snide comments. Rebecca and Lucy returned to their work too, after Desmond had assured them that he only needed a short break.

He then made his way over to the little cooking corner they had established, if it could even be called that: it contained a fridge and a microwave. It wasn't enough to make a nice meal with, but they didn't have the supplies for that anyway, so it didn't really matter.

He opened the fridge and randomly grabbed one of the many instant menus that were the only thing (besides some yoghurts and milk) in the fridge, opened it up, plucked some holes in it and put it into the microwave. Then he leaned against the wall, his arms crossed before his chest, and observed the cave – sorry, Sanctuary – they'd been staying in for about a week now.

It still felt weird to be in a place he knew so well from his memories, especially since it hadn't changed at all in the last five hundred years. It may have become a bit dusty and some debris was lying on the ground, but all in all it was the same room he had visited so many times in the form of Ezio. The statues were still in perfect condition and even the seals Ezio had gathered to get to Altair's armour were still in place.

It made all the cables and machines and laptops standing around look totally out of place. Not even its occupants really fit in the room, with their modern clothing: jeans and headphones and watches.

But then again, he didn't fit in either, did he? He had to look down to make sure he was wearing his usual white hoodie and his favourite jeans and not the assassin robe

and armour he had become so used to in the last weeks. The only thing that was the same was the hidden blade apparatus he wore on his right wrist.

The ping of the microwave tore him out of his musings and he went to retrieve his food – curry chicken, it seemed; he only had that twice this week yet – before he installed himself on the only plastic chair they had at their so-called dining table, an improvised thing made out of two boxes and a more or less straight plate on it.

He immediately began to shovel the food in his mouth, not caring if it was a little too hot. He was starving. Every time he came out of the Animus he felt as if he had really done all the stunts he did as Ezio instead of just lying around all day long. He knew that it was his mind playing tricks on him and that his body didn't need the food all that badly, but he couldn't help it. Besides, what harm did it do? He might gain a little weight, but who was he trying to impress anyway, stuck in this cave all day long?

His eyes unconsciously slid over to where Lucy was sorting through some papers and every now and then pushing a strand of hair out of her face that immediately fell back into place. It was her little quirk, as it was Shaun's to regularly push his glasses back up and fiddle with his watch, and Rebecca's to nod her head to a song she liked and hum quietly to herself.

Desmond wasn't sure if it was, again, thanks to Ezio that he'd become more observant or if he just spent too much time holed up with these three. It was probably a bit of both, and it was the only entertaining thing he could do around here when he was outside of the Animus. It wasn't like the others would agree to take a break to play poker with him or anything, busy as they were with saving the world and everything. The shadowy form of Ezio distracted him from observing his co-workers as it marched right through his line of vision to come to a stop in front of Altair's statue, looking up at his ancestor. It seemed Desmond wasn't the only one trying to get answers from his ancestor, even if his way was a bit more sophisticated.

He noticed that Ezio looked younger than the one he was used to, without a beard and with regular armour. But it was the composure that spoke of restlessness that convinced Desmond more than anything that this was Ezio at the very beginning of his career as an assassin, full of need for revenge, but not sure yet how to get it, not caring about it either way; so unlike his older, calmer, more reasonable self whose composure spoke of authority and complete control over the situation, no matter how dire it became. Ezio really had come a long way to become the Master Assassin he was nowadays, or rather had been.

Desmond massaged his forehead as the headache he had since he left the Animus got a bit worse. He'd gotten so used to it by now that he only felt it when it was worse than usual.

"You alright?"

He blinked as Lucy came over to him, the worried frown she always wore when talking to Desmond on full power. She offered him one of the two cans of Coke she had brought and he gladly took and opened it while she pulled a box over to the table to sit with him.

"I should start collecting one dollar every time you ask me that. I'd be rich in no time at all," he joked and took a big gulp from the coke. The stuff was the only thing that kept him going nowadays, it seemed. It also helped to clear his head a little; even if the Bleeding Effect didn't disappear, at least he felt a bit more awake to better distinguish between past and present.

"I'm serious," Lucy insisted, trying to stare him down, but he wasn't intimidated. Hell, he had faced many more scary opponents than the petite woman in front of him, as

Ezio, but still...

"So am I." He leaned back in his chair, a dangerous manoeuvre seeing as it might break down under his weight any minute now. It was a risk he needed to take if he wanted to appear nonchalant and relaxed.

Lucy wasn't convinced by his act, though. "You're having a headache." Damn, he forgot he wasn't the only assassin around with superior observational skills.

"Nothing I can't handle. It will pass." Her eyes bore into his and he tried his hardest not to look away.

"Anything else? Like hallucinations?"

His eyes automatically wandered to Altair's statue before he could help it. Ezio was still there. "I'm seeing Altair over there," he tried to joke to distract Lucy, who had of course seen his gaze wander off.

It seemed to work. Lucy sighed. "Why don't you ever take anything serious?"

"Because if I frowned as much as you do, I would more than likely get some serious wrinkles, and I'm way too young for that."

Finally Lucy smiled and Desmond felt like he'd won a great victory. Even if it was with a pretty lame joke, but beggars can't be choosers, right?

"Is it really that bad?"

He nodded and looked at her as serious as he could - which wasn't saying all that much. "Yes, it is. It's about time we save the world so you can finally show me how to have fun," he jokingly reminded her about the conversation they had on their little trip to the Sanctuary.

She nodded and crossed her arms before her chest to appear more serious, but the lingering smile on her face destroyed the effect. She was quite a bad actress, which was actually pretty endearing. Who would have thought that perfect Lucy even had any flaws? Besides being a total workaholic, of course.

"Right. It's about time I show you that there are much better things to do than swimming in sewers."

Desmond held up his hands in defence. "That was your idea!"

"You said yourself you had the time of your life," she countered and he grudgingly gave up. Point for her.

"Fine. But I'm sure we'll find other things to do that are even more fun," he answered without thinking and only realized how ambiguous that came out when it was already too late. Huh, Ezio seemed to rub off on him more than he had realized.

Lucy chose to tactfully ignore him and finish her Coke instead of replying, although the faint blush on her cheeks proved that she had understood the double meaning. Of course. Even a dead log would have gotten it.

"I'd better get back in the Animus," he said before the silence got too uncomfortable and reached out to take Lucy's empty can. When she handed it to him, he was painfully aware how they both tried their best not to touch and looked about everywhere besides at each other.

"You're sure you're up to it? Maybe you should get a couple hours of sleep?"

Desmond shook his head as he made his way over to the trash bin to dispose of their empty coke cans. "I'll be fine. There'll be more than enough time to catch up with sleep once we find the, uh, POE."

He turned back just in time to see her smile at him, using her and Rebecca's abbreviation that had confused him so much only a week ago. "Alright. But don't overdo it, Desmond."

"I won't," he waved her off and made his way back to the Animus as she took her place

in front of the laptop again, trying his hardest to ignore Ezio's shadow as it crossed him on his way back out of the Sanctuary.

## Kapitel 3: Ezio Auditore, 1503

Ezio leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, as he waited for the last of his recruits to arrive so they could start their mission to finally catch the Banker or at least get a solid lead on him. The Assassin resisted the temptation to fidget; it would do no good after all to let the already present recruits, namely Veronica and her team, get the impression he was nervous when he was simply a bit impatient.

He had wanted to go alone, but had seen reason when Machiavelli suggested a little back-up could never hurt. This mission was too important to take any risks.

And Veronica and her team had already proven themselves on their mission, leading their fellow assassin to safety while disposing of all those that opposed them. Flavio was a brute of a man who could crush an enemy with his bare hands if he decided to, but was much too gentle to do it without being seriously provoked. He really wasn't cut out to be an assassin, but he was fiercely protective of his family and friends, and decided that joining the Brotherhood was the best course of action to save Roma.

Carlotta was the exact opposite of Flavio. With her petite build and agility, it was easy for her to slip right behind an enemy, take him down and disappear before anyone even realized what had happened - like a true assassin. But she needed to rely on her skills to stay hidden since she wasn't a very strong fighter, which made her a perfect match with Flavio. That was probably the reason why Veronica had chosen those two for her team.

Veronica... Ezio watched her chatting with Carlotta like it was any other day, probably to show that there was no need to be afraid of the upcoming mission. He'd been surprised to find her gone when he woke up this morning and he'd only gotten to exchange a few words with her before her team joined them in the hall, where she explained that she liked to watch the sun rise over Rome, something he had a hard time to understand since he was more of a night owl than an early bird. Sun settings were much more to his liking.

Finally, the last recruit stumbled through the door in his haste, his robe rumpled and only just pulling up his hood to hide his messy black bed hair, grinning apologetically. Nico, their newest recruit and also the youngest. He still had a lot to learn.

Well, he'd probably get enough practice during this mission.

Ezio pushed himself off the wall and pulled himself to his full height in front of the four gathered recruits. "I'm going to visit a senator today that may be our chance to get to a higher placed Templar. I don't know what to expect, but this lead is too important to take any chances, which is the reason why I need you to have my back. Stay out of sight and only act when I give the signal to, capite?"

The recruits nodded, their faces serious and their backs straight, ready to help out the man that had saved and recruited them.

The Assassin nodded, satisfied. "Alright, let's go. The Campidoglio is our destination."

Ezio pulled his sword out of the stomach of the last guard and after wiping it off, slipped it back into his sheath. Ignoring the senator he had just saved from the violent debt collectors, he turned his back to him and observed the plaza, making sure no other guards had seen his little slaying of their comrades.

Satisfied that the danger was over for now, he finally turned to Egidio. He needed to bring the senator someplace safe, best without further alerting any guards. He could

hold his own in a fight, but it was much more difficult to do so while simultaneously defending someone completely helpless.

After explaining his plan to the senator and receiving many thanks, he held up his arm and pointed one finger to the ground beside him. A moment later, Veronica appeared besides him, having seen the signal from her position on the roof behind them.

"I need you to distract the guards while I bring the senator to safety. Wait for my signal, don't take any unnecessary risks and disappear once we pass. Tell the others."

She nodded once and ran off to where Ezio had seen Flavio hiding in the crowd. Then he turned back to the senator who had watched the short exchange with a slight look of amazement. "Stay right behind me and do as I say," he ordered and Egidio nodded, much too grateful for the help to complain about being ordered around. Wise man.

They began the long trek across streets filled with hostile guards and Ezio's senses were on full alert. One mistake and not only Egidio's life would be in danger, but his recruits' as well. He told himself to be patient despite their progress being painfully slow, always having to wait for a group to slip by the guards unnoticed and holding his breath in anticipation of the worst until they were a safe distance away. Then a new group of guards appeared and the game began anew.

It was a very slow process, but they managed to reach the safe house Egidio had told him about without being spotted once, and much to Ezio's relief, without having to rely on his recruits to distract the guards for them. He knew he could trust them to complete their mission successfully, but he still preferred to keep them out of danger as much as he could, more so seeing as there seemed to be more guards around today than usual, and even worse, most of them were Brutes, wearing heavy armour and heavy weapons.

At that moment he spotted the guards lingering in front of the door and cursed under his breath. Of course it would have been much too easy if this whole thing had worked out without a problem. "We need to move on," he told Egidio and the tedious trek across the streets of Roma started again.

Then came the moment Ezio had dreaded from the very beginning: four guards blocking their way up the stairs and no crowd to help them slip past them. Ezio automatically looked for the crates and beams leading to the roofs before remembering that that way was out of question for his companion. No thieves, courtesans or mercenaries to be seen either. It seemed he was on his own this time.

He gestured for Egidio to wait, then moved closer to the guards and gave the signal for his recruits to attack. Not a second later Flavio ran past him, his big sword branded and drew all of the attention to him. That was the moment the other three struck.

Veronica jumped from the roof onto a Brute and buried her hidden blade right in the small crack between armour and helmet, taking him out with one hit and then swiftly climbed up the wall to the roof again. Carlotta came out of nowhere and slipped behind another one, slit his throat and disappeared in the shadows of a small alley before the guard had even crumpled to the floor. Nico did the same, just a bit slower than his female companion and had to dodge a sword strike from the only remaining guard before Flavio, using the distraction Nico had provided, buried his sword right through the back of his opponent. The younger one grinned and held up a hand in thanks before nimbly scaling the wall to join Veronica on the roofs while Flavio sheathed his sword again, mumbled what Ezio assumed to be a short prayer under his breath, and then disappeared in the crowd again.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Ezio motioned for Egidio to join him again and hurried up the stairs and away from the bodies before other guards could notice them.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the only situation where he had to rely on his recruits to dispose of the guards to free his way. He wasn't sure if it was bad luck or if the guards were actively searching for them, but he had an even harder time remaining unnoticed. He was all the more grateful to his loyal recruits, without whom he would have never even made it this far without having to sully his own hands and endangering his charge.

They were only two streets away from their destination, the third safe house after the previous two had been swarming with guards, when their luck ran out. The two of them had just slipped past another group of guards when Egidio tripped and stumbled into the young lady before him, whose group they had used as cover.

"Keep your hands off her!" The man accompanying her shouted, completely misinterpreting the situation, and succeeding in getting the attention of all those around them. This unfortunately included the guards who immediately spotted the senator.

"Get him!"

"Cazzo," Ezio cursed under his breath, shoved Egidio behind him and drew his sword, taking on a defensive position. But before the guards had even done more than three steps in their direction, his recruits fell upon them without having waited for his signal. Carlotta and Veronica managed to kill their targets, but the other two weren't so lucky this time.

Flavio's opponent was as skilled as him in swordsmanship and managed to hold his own against the giant assassin, while also having the advantage of heavier armour that protected him much better. Nico though, had missed the crack between armour and helmet by an inch and his hidden blade had slid off harmlessly of the armour, no deadlier than a fly and the guard he had failed to kill was a hawk he had managed to anger.

As if the situation wasn't bad enough, a patrol came around the corner at that moment, saw what was going on and ran to help their two remaining comrades, so that his recruits were now outmatched.

That didn't look good. Ezio glanced around and luckily spotted what he had been looking for: a hiding place for Egidio. He was pretty sure Veronica and Flavio could handle two opponents at once, but Carlotta was no good in an open fight and Nico still too inexperienced. He had to help them.

He grabbed the senator's arm, pulled him to the hay stack and, ignoring his protests, pushed him in. "Hide here until I come and get you," he ordered and without making sure that Egidio would obey, turned around on the spot and ran to his recruits' aid. They had somehow managed to take down one guard, but it still looked bleak since the remaining five were Brutes and Carlotta had already been hurt during the short skirmish. Nothing major, only a cut to the leg, but still enough to slow her down considerably and thus make her unable to fight, her speed her only advantage after all.

Ezio had his sword sheeted again, would it do him no good in a fight against those Brutes, since they tended to blow it out of his hands with one mighty hit anyway. No, it was best to rely on his fists to block and hidden blades to kill.

Judging the remaining distance, he sped up some more and then jumped off to land on the back of the nearest guard that Flavio was holding off at the moment and slipped his blade through the crack in the helmet that allowed them to see.

Flavio heaved a sigh of relief as he was now able to concentrate on his only remaining opponent without having to worry about the other one running off to finish Carlotta,

who was leaning against the wall someway off, wrapping her leg with an improvised bandage.

Ezio then turned his attention to the second guard Veronica was trying to hold off, who had turned to him the moment his comrade had fallen and was now circling him, looking for an opening, while the Assassin did the same.

"All that armour and still too scared to attack?" Ezio taunted him, but the guard was too smart to fall for it. He swung his axe in his direction, carefully testing the waters, an attack which the Assassin nimbly dodged, but before he could counter the guard had taken a defensive position again.

Damn it, at this point this would take way too long. He couldn't risk another patrol coming along, that would be their death sentence. His recruits were already at their end with all the free running and killing they had done today.

At that moment a horribly familiar scream echoed through the street and Ezio felt chilled to the bone. Only his many years of being an Assassin forbid him to immediately turn around - and get his head chopped off in the process. Instead he feigned an attack, drove his opponent a few feet back, then turned tail and put some distance between them while looking for the source of the scream.

It was Nico, as he'd already suspected. What he didn't expect though was that instead of a flesh wound, a cross bolt was stuck in his shoulder. But in that second, it didn't matter all that much. If he didn't hurry, the bolt would be the least of Nico's worries. With a loud battle cry that surprised him at least as much as it surprised the guard that halted just a second in his swing that would have been the end of his youngest recruit, he rammed into the side of the Brute, taking him down with him and thus removing the immediate danger to Nico's life.

His shoulder hurt like hell, but that didn't matter. He staggered to his feet and drew his sword before the guard had any chance of getting up, hindered by the same armour that was supposed to protect him, and rammed it into his throat. His gaze was already wandering around as he pulled the sword back out, too preoccupied to clean it before he sheathed it again this time.

Then he spotted the crossbowman on the rooftop, already aiming his next shot and his heart leapt to his throat when he realized he could do nothing to stop him. "Nico, take cover!" He shouted desperately as he turned to his newest charge, who only regarded him in utter confusion, the pain from the shoulder wound clouding his senses.

Confusion turned to shock as the next bolt bore his way right through Nico's armour and into his chest. A feeling of helplessness washed over Ezio as the boy crumbled to the floor, which soon turned into fiery rage.

He kicked the guard he had abandoned earlier and was now closing in again in the gut, not caring about hurting his foot in the process, ducked under the clumsy swing from his axe and bore his two hidden blades into the eyes of the guards, easily taking him out now that he had completely forgotten about being careful.

Ezio then took his own crossbow from his back, loaded it and fired it at the killer on the rooftop before he had even finished aiming, taking him out in one, deadly shot right through the throat.

The feeling of satisfaction he got from this death only lasted for a second before the feeling of dread overtook and he turned to his three remaining recruits. Flavio and Veronica had fortunately managed to take out their own opponents, but instead of vanishing like they'd done every time before, they were standing around, lost, not knowing how to proceed and looking at him for direction.

He swallowed. They relied on him, were his responsibility, so he had to be the leader they now needed and not the desperate man he felt like. "Veronica, help Carlotta in returning to the hideout and get her wound treated. Flavio, you stay with me."

Veronica hesitated and looked at him, unsure. "What about—"

"I'll take care of it. Do as I say," he interrupted her, his tone a bit sharper than intended, but it had the desired effect. The female assassin straightened up, nodded, and made her way over to Carlotta while he turned towards where Nico lay unmoving on the ground.

It were a mere five steps to get to him, but Ezio felt as if the air had turned into spider webs, trying to keep him from moving forwards. He felt like he'd just run a mile when he finally knelt beside the body of his fallen comrade, checking his pulse out of pure habit and feeling the last of his hope, which he hadn't even known he still had, drain away when there was none.

He closed his eyes for a moment, fighting to stay calm, before he brushed Nico's eyes closed, thus hiding the terrified expression he wore in his last moments. "Requiescat in Pace," he mumbled and then turned to Flavio who had silently waited behind him, his head bowed in respect.

"I need you to bring him back to the hideout. Machiavelli will handle the preparations for his burial."

"What about the senator?" Flavio regarded him calmly, like he was the one in charge and not Ezio, who was too tired to admire the recruit for staying in control when he himself had lost it momentarily.

"I'll handle it. Now go."

Without further protest, the giant carefully picked the body up, as if Nico was only sleeping and he didn't want to wake him up, and went off while Ezio slowly returned to the haystack Egidio hid in, trying to collect himself and focus on his current mission: bringing the man to safety.

He grabbed the senator by the arm and pulled him out, ignoring his complaints and how he demonstratively brushed himself off. "Let's go."

His senses were on full alert as they continued their way through the street, feeling as if everything around him was happening in slow motion. He carefully stayed in the crowd, invisible to the guards that were still patrolling the streets, even when they found the bodies of their comrades and started being a lot more alert than before.

He couldn't afford to make a mistake now or the next one dead would be the senator. Their destination was just around the corner, the very same corner where another group of guards lingered and didn't make the impression that they wanted to move anytime soon. There was no way to get past them using the people as cover and even if he took them out, there were too many guards patrolling that even he would have some trouble dealing with all of them.

It was at that moment that his luck finally decided to return to him as a group of courtesans appeared further down the street. He looked at Egidio who had silently followed him after the hay fiasco, trying to decide if he should let him wait here while he approached the group or take him with him, even if they would take a bit longer that way, when the courtesans took the decision from him and flowed right up to them, flirty waving at every man that they passed.

"Messer Ezio," the most mature looking courtesan greeted him while she linked arms with him. "We heard you may be in need of our help, so we hurried here."

Ezio smiled charmingly, gladly slipping back into his womanizer role and a bit farther away from the bitter reality of what had happened. "I have never been happier to see

you, my ladies," he said, earning a chorus of flattered giggles as the women winked at him. "But whoever informed you of my predicament?"

"Oh, it was a giant of a man, scary if not for his gentle nature," a blond courtesan explained, a light blush on her cheeks before she looked rather disappointed. "Another group helped him stay undetected."

Ezio breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to know that Flavio had found a way to get back without gathering too much attention. He silently promised to thank the recruit for his foresight to send the courtesans to his aid. "If you could distract those guards for me, I'd be very grateful, signorinas."

"Anything for you, Messer Ezio," the leader of the group agreed with a last suggestive look in his direction before she and her companions swaggered over to the guards and started their seducing act. Ezio didn't blame the men for immediately leaving their post.

He took the chance and with Egidio in tow slipping past the engrossed guards and into the little niche where finally waited the door of the safe house for them. The senator eagerly opened the door and both let out a little sigh of relief when Ezio closed it again behind them, finally safe from the guards.

At least for now.

"How much do you owe the Banker?" Demanded Ezio, interrupting Egidio's tirade of thanks.

He looked a bit desperate. Their successful escape was already forgotten when reminded that his problem hadn't been solved by a long shot, only delayed. "3000 Florin. He won't let off until I pay my debt."

Ezio nodded. "I'll get the money. Stay safe until I return," he said and turned his back to the shocked senator, starting to scale the wall. His mission complete, his mind was already focusing on the next thing he needed to do: get back to the hideout and his recruits. The senator and the Banker would have to wait just another day.

Ezio looked from the hooded recruits to Machiavelli, La Volpe, Claudia and Bartolomeo, who had all taken the time to pay their last respects to Nico di Angelo, his newest and youngest recruit, who was lying on a big pyre, worthy of a king, in a deserted field not far from Tiber Island. Yet even though the whole Brotherhood had come together, thus showing that even the least of their assassins was as much part of their family as any other, it saddened Ezio to not see anyone else. Part of the reason Nico had been so willing to join them and fight the Borgia was that he had lost his family to them, which was also the reason Ezio had let him join despite his young age. He wouldn't have survived a week on his own in the streets of Roma, but he had reminded him so much of himself, twenty-five years ago when he had desperately hung onto his need for revenge to get through the loss of his father and brothers.

Now he wondered if he had made the wrong decision after all. Maybe the boy would still be alive after all if he hadn't let him join. Or maybe he would have died within a day, trying to take down the murderers of his family with him. Ezio would never know. He had to live with the blood he had on his hands and the guilt, a very familiar feeling that he usually managed to push aside.

His eyes fell on the peaceful face of Nico and wandered down to the pompous ceremonial robes he was dressed in now, a bit too big for his lanky form, making him look that much younger still, and closed his eyes for a moment.

When he finally broke the silence that so heavily hung over all of them, it was only to utter three very familiar words. "Requiescat in Pace."

He felt there was no need to say more. They all felt the loss of their brother and there was no need to spin glorious tales about him to make them miss him all the more. The burial in itself spoke of their appreciation for him and honoured the dead.

As the others repeated the phrase, he took up the waiting torch and set the pyre aflame before stepping back to stand among his brothers and sisters, silently watching the fire slowly consume the body.

When Claudia grabbed his hand and lightly squeezed it, he held on for dear life, as much to reassure her as to reassure himself that they'd be fine again, someday.

## Kapitel 4: Desmond Miles, 2012

Desmond was in a dark mood when he heaved himself out of the Animus and couldn't even muster his trademark grin when he noticed Lucy's ever worried look. Instead he made his way straight to the little cabinet where they kept the aspirin and popped two into his mouth before going to grab the bottle of water from the fridge to wash them down. He didn't even feel hungry this time, even if it was ridiculous that the death of a recruit five hundred years ago should affect him that much. He had Ezio to thank for that, and the strong synchronization he had with the old Assassin.

"Desmond, are you alright?" came the mandatory question and he turned to Lucy, forcing a smile on his face. According to the look she gave him it probably came out more as a grimace. Well, at least he had tried.

"Certamente. Ho solo bisogno di un po' d'aria fresca. (Sure. I just need a little fresh air)" he replied and before she could worry even more, he grabbed the earpiece he was supposed to put on when venturing outside and hurriedly left the Sanctuary, leaving a flabbergasted team behind.

"Is it only me or did he just speak Italian?" Shaun said while Rebecca and Lucy looked at each other worriedly.

In the meantime Desmond sprinted across the courtyard of the villa at full speed, fully enjoying the wind that blew in his face and not caring that his legs already hurt, not used to the exercise anymore after so many weeks spent lying motionlessly in the Animus.

It was good to finally get out of the cave, breathe fresh air and run with his own legs instead of his ancestor's in a virtual world. It helped him clear his head and try to remember who he was outside of Ezio's memories, something he had started having some trouble with. He knew he should probably tell the others and cut down on his time spent in the Animus, but he also knew how important finding the Apple was to their cause, and maybe even the world, if one really believed that the calamity Minerva had told them about through Ezio would come to pass.

Desmond miscalculated the distance to the next roof and scrambled to catch the edge with his hands, hissing when he felt the force of gravity in his shoulders, as unaccustomed to the strain as his legs. He pulled himself up and shook his head. No more thinking about what might or might not be. He had enough on his plate already, and this was the only time he could really enjoy himself, the only time he felt really free, even if the earpiece was a constant reminder that he still had a leash on.

But that didn't matter right now; he wanted to run, to fly through the night, not as Ezio Auditore, but as Desmond Miles and push his body to the limit and beyond so his mind wouldn't be able to get confused anymore about who he really was.

He jumped to another roof and from there, over some beams to the next one, taking a turn to the right when he spotted the grey image of Ezio on his left, refusing to acknowledge it.

He continued running, easily finding his path on the rooftops, so familiar from both Ezio's and his memory from previous nights, until he finally came to a stop on one of the higher buildings near the gate leading outside. Out of breath he sat down, his back leaning against the chimney, looking over the countryside, so near and yet so far away.

No matter how much he liked the little city - he still wasn't sure if that was him or Ezio - he yearned to get out of here, to see something other than the Sanctuary and the same rooftops every night. He was also starting to miss the sunlight.

Desmond couldn't even remember the last time he had seen the sun rise. It had probably been in New York, after a long shift, sometime before Abstergo had caught him.

That seemed like a lifetime ago, or maybe even two lifetimes, considering he had lived - and was still living - through the lives of both Altair and Ezio.

Hell, before his capture he hadn't had a worry in the world. He had been convinced he was finally free to live his life and it had been awesome. Being a bartender had maybe not been his dream job, but it still had had its advantages. Having lots of contact with different people, for example, was something he had craved all his life after being held prisoner in the Farm, growing up with the same people and never meeting anyone new.

And now it was the same again and he was starting to wonder if it would ever end, if he would ever be free again to walk the streets as he pleased. Maybe after they had found the Apple, but he doubted it. He may have clung to that hope in the beginning, naïve as he had been, but he had started to realize that nothing would ever be able to completely end the war between Assassins and Templars. They had fought since the beginning of time - some battles lost, some won, but it would never truly end as long as even one of them still breathed.

And there would always be one.

"Desmond, you should get back. In a few minutes, the sun will rise."

Lucy's voice startled him out of his musings. When he looked around he noticed that it was indeed starting to dawn, so he got up with a sigh, turning his back to where he knew the sun would rise, resisting the temptation to stay just long enough to get to see it again.

He slowly started to make his way back to the villa, trying to stay out of the cave as long as possible, unwilling to return even one moment too soon. All the fervour from his free run earlier was forgotten as he lazily swung himself from a beam to a roof below, and then climbed up another one, staying out of sight of the windows, not willing to take the risk of being seen, even if it was unlikely anyone was up already. This city lived off tourism, and no tourist got up that early in the morning.

It was probably his reluctance to return that made him careless. One second he was jumping to another rooftop, and the next he was falling, having missed the ledge by an inch. His heart surged and his calm was completely forgotten as he desperately tried to grab hold of something to break his fall, but there was nothing.

He steeled himself for the impact that came a moment later – fortunately not as hard as it could have been, as he landed on a car that somehow cushioned his fall. Unfortunately, the car didn't appreciate being misused as a cushion and promptly sounded alarm.

Hastily, Desmond scrambled to get off and away, ignoring the pain in his back and sprinted towards the villa as fast as he could, not answering Lucy's worried questions in favour of simply getting enough air into his lungs to continue running.

When he finally was behind the villa again, he took a moment to lean against a wall and catch his breath. He grimaced as he massaged his bruised shoulder. So that was how Ezio felt when he tumbled down a building and flew from crime scenes. He really hadn't wanted to know this in such detail.

"Desmond? Desmond!"

He sighed. "Don't get your panties in a knot, I'm back already." The silence that followed clearly indicated that Lucy was sulking and with a last look at the ever brightening sky, he made his way back down to the dark safety of the Sanctuary where he was at once welcomed by a rather flustered Lucy.

"What happened? The alarm-"

He scratched the back of his head, grinning sheepishly. "It seems cars don't really like being used as landing platforms."

Lucy frowned, but before she could ask what the hell he had been doing, he explained. "I kinda missed a ledge. I swear I didn't do it on purpose."

While Lucy's anger immediately switched to worry, which was so very surprising - at least the anger had been new and even kind of refreshing. Shaun of course couldn't let the matter go without giving his cynical comment. "I guess that will help you remember that you are, in fact, not Ezio, despite your wishful thinking."

Desmond didn't answer, but he silently wished it was that easy.

## Kapitel 5: Ezio Auditore, 1503

"Are you sure you want to do this today?" Machiavelli watched Ezio like a hawk as the latter put on his armour, carefully fastening the numerous straps so it wouldn't hinder him in his movements. Any other day Ezio would probably have made a joke about how he never would have thought Machiavelli cared, but his sombre mood made him unusual serious.

"It can't wait. The senator needs to repay his debt before the collectors find and kill him. He's the only lead to the Banker we have, so we can't jeopardize this mission." That was the speech he had convinced himself with to get out of bed this morning and continue his work, and if Machiavelli wondered at how rehearsed it sounded, he didn't comment on it. Ezio was grateful for that.

"Be careful. As one of Cesare's generals, he is sure to be well protected. Take no unnecessary risks." The silent 'we can't afford to lose you' was left unsaid, but not unheard.

Ezio nodded. "I'll return successful." That was the least he could do to honour Nico's sacrifice. Without another word he pulled his hood over his head and left the hideout, feeling Machiavelli's worried gaze follow him until he was out of sight. He didn't even spare Veronica a second glance as he passed her in the hallway, already completely focused on his mission.

As it turned out, it was a long and tedious mission. After giving Egidio the money, he had to follow him over the rooftops for several blocks, staying out of sight of the men accompanying the senator, as well as the numerous archers and crossbowmen stationed on the rooftops. Those he took out with deadly precision before they could alarm anyone to his presence, feeling less remorseful about their deaths than usual, but not wanting to think about the reason for that.

He completely focused on his mission, gladly pushing everything else aside for now, relishing in the feeling of jumping from roof to roof and masterfully balancing over washing lines hung between buildings, easily following his targets until they finally reached the Pantheon where the guard carrying the money went inside, presumably to count it while the others stayed outside guarding the entrance.

Ezio thought quickly. Either he could wait for the guard to finish and continue following them to the location of the Banker or ... His eyes fell on the open roof of the building before him and he smirked, immediately looking for a way to get up there, his decision made.

Ezio finished putting on the guard's armour and quickly hid the body and his own clothing before finally stepping outside to join his impatient, new comrades, just in time to stop them from killing the senator. It was good to know it had been the right decision to infiltrate the Pantheon and don this disguise. He could have done nothing to help Egidio from his place on the roofs without putting this whole mission in jeopardy.

Speaking of his mission, apparently he was supposed to lead the way. Just his luck. Carefully judging the reactions of the guards following him, he started making his way through the streets of Rome, soon enough getting a feeling in what direction they were heading which made it that much easier to stay inconspicuous. Listening to their

babbling soon gave him an idea what their destination was: the Vaticano District. It was the only place lying in this direction that was big enough to hold a party of the proportion they were talking about, and the most secure, much to his displeasure - not that he had expected an easy assassination.

It turned out to be even harder than expected. Not long after his successful infiltration as Luigi, his cover was blown and in a place crawling with guards to top it off. The only reason he hadn't been caught yet was thanks to the courtesans present, who had immediately sent for back-up and reported the situation to Claudia, and were now taking care of getting him closer to his target.

It was a very slow process, but Ezio had been an assassin for a long time now and even if he had been the opposite of patient in the beginning, he had learned that being hasty would only get him killed and let his target escape.

He had also learned to trust his instincts, and they told him that he was being followed. Knowing that he would have been attacked or at least discovered by now if his shadow wanted him ill, he could only assume that it was in fact an ally. And the fact that he didn't reveal himself and was able to keep from being discovered, despite his eagle eyes, told him that it was most likely one of his recruits.

As if he hadn't enough to deal with at the moment. He just hoped that the recruit was smart enough to stay hidden and not to compromise his mission. Either way, he was going to give him hell once this was over.

Ezio was now in front of some stairs blocked by a handful of guards, watching his target make his way up and trying to find a way to follow him without being noticed. He sent his loyal courtesans out to distract those in his way, then rounded the stairs, keeping hidden behind the walls. After making sure no one was looking in his direction, he climbed his way up and kept following the guard with the chest at a safe distance while a courtesan messed with his head, thus lowering his guard considerably.

He finally made it to the place where the real party was being held, and for once, luck was on his side as the Banker finally made his appearance, introducing himself as Juan Borgia to the unfortunate courtesan that had caught his attention.

Of course. He should have known Cesare wouldn't leave his funds in the hands of anyone but his family.

He stealthily proceeded to follow his target, slinking from group to group to stay undetected, waiting for his opportunity to strike, all the while listening to the Borgias' speech about power. He'd realize soon enough that no amount of power could protect him from the Assassin. He'd make sure of that.

It was at that moment he spotted Cesare and the Spaniard, and it was only due to his long trained self-control he neither froze on the spot nor charged them mindlessly, but instead hopped into the conveniently placed hay cart, his heart beating faster despite him, and watched the Borgias from his hiding spot. What were they doing here? Cesare he could understand, after all he had an image to keep and showing up to gloat at such a party sure fit his goal, but the Pope?

Well, at least it explained why there were so many guards around.

He listened to Cesare's boisterous speech about uniting all of Italia under his banner, noticed the look on Rodrigo's face that clearly told that this wasn't according to his plan and that he didn't like it one bit - which was probably what he told his son after he finished his speech – and then Ezio's silly shadow chose the worst possible moment to make its appearance, stepping out in the open just at the moment the Pope let his

eyes wander across the room.

Ezio reacted instantly and reached out of his hiding spot to sling an arm around the waist of the recruit, the other across the mouth to keep him from shouting out his surprise, and pulled him to safety, all in the matter of barely a second. The recruit only struggled for a moment before realizing what had happened, then fell still and waited silently for him to say something.

He first made sure that his little stunt hadn't drawn too much attention and heaved a sigh of relief when the Spaniard shook his head and made his way inside, seemingly not having spotted his stupid recruit after all. Then he turned to said recruit, still pinned under him and furiously demanded, "What do you think you are doing?"

Veronica looked at him with wide eyes before her stubbornness kicked in. "I thought nobody was looking in my direction! How could I have foreseen that Rodrigo would choose that moment to look over the crowd?" she whispered in reply, at least as furious as he and pushed against his hold, but he wasn't relenting.

"I meant why are you even here? Wasn't I clear enough when I gave you the day off?" She held his burning gaze for a second before looking away. "I was worried and wanted to help."

Ezio snorted. "A great job you did there," he answered sarcastically, before finally rolling off her and peeking out of their hiding spot. "You wait here. Once I kill the Banker, you should easily be able to get out of here with me drawing all the attention. Got it?"

When she didn't answer, he turned around and looked at her sternly. "Got it?"

She pressed her lips together, but finally nodded reluctantly, probably realizing he wouldn't accept any protests. "Got it."

With that, he checked one last time if the coast was clear, then swiftly climbed out of the hay cart and immediately took cover in a group of people that waited beside it. With a quick glance, he took in the position of the guards, his target and hiding spots and decided how best to proceed.

He slowly started to make his way to the Banker, waiting in groups until the guards looked the other way, then proceeding to the next bench, then to a group of courtesans, and then he was finally in reach of his target, waiting on another bench for him to pass this way again and readying his hidden blade.

His body tensed when his target approached; he was finally close enough and Ezio reacted in an instant, grabbing him and burying his hidden blade deep into his back before placing him on the same bench where he had waited for the kill.

While the guards stood around in confusion and shock, instead of taking the opportunity to get away, Ezio took the time to listen to the last words of his enemy and say his blessing. They may have stood on different sides, but that didn't mean he wouldn't show him this last respect. That's how he was taught, and that's how he would always handle it.

The moment the Banker took his very last breath, the guards came out of their stupor and drew their weapons, crying in alarm. But Ezio was already running, pushing through the crowd, jumping over the wall and doing a perfect leap of faith into the hay stack ten meters below, which he had seen during his infiltration.

He immediately got out and running again, sure that the guards wouldn't give up so easily and needing the head start to get out of enemy territory. But instead of ducking into a dark alley and disappearing from his pursuers' view, he swiftly scaled up the wall and made his way over the rooftops where he was easily spotted.

Just as planned, as he wanted to draw enough attention to himself to give his silly

recruit a chance to make her escape.

A quick glance behind him confirmed that it worked out all too well. There were at least half a dozen agile guards easily following over the rooftops, even slowly catching up, and he was quite sure that the others, not quite as nimble, were waiting for him on the ground.

Ezio quickly took in his surroundings, his mind whirling, trying to come up with the best strategy to escape. After a moment, he decided that getting to the river was probably his best bet, and he pushed himself even more, praying that his head start was enough to get there without having to fight.

Taking out the crossbowman in front of him with a precisely thrown knife cost him about half a second, which very nearly turned out to be fatal in the end. He was about five feet from the edge of the roof and thus the saving jump into the river when one of the Agiles pursuing him made a desperate lunge at him, managed to catch him off guard, too focused on his escape that was so very close.

He stumbled as the guard got hold of his right leg, desperately trying to free himself while simultaneously fighting to keep his balance. He did manage to free his leg with a sharp tug, but that proved to be a very big mistake, as he lost his balance for good and went crashing down.

He went right over the edge and to the street below, and this time, there was no hay stack to cushion his fall. The impact pushed the breath right out of him and black dots sprinkled his vision as he desperately fought not to lose consciousness, gritting his teeth against the pain and inwardly screaming at his body to move, *move* before the guards could finish him. It felt like an eternity before he finally managed to roll from his back to the side, hissing as his bruised body protested against the mistreatment, and struggled to his feet, stumbling more than actually walking the small distance to the little wall, which was the last obstacle between him and freedom.

Then he finally crossed it and fell down into the safety of the river.

Veronica took her demotion from team leader and her rank as Milite to Assistente with a straight face, clearly regretting her decision to go against Ezio's order, especially since she had turned out to be more of a burden than of any help.

He assigned Flavio as the new leader since he trusted the gentle giant to keep a calm head at all times and still be strong minded enough to keep his temperamental teammate in check and thus out of trouble.

When he dismissed the team, Veronica hesitated for a moment, clearly wishing to speak with him, but not quite daring with so many people around. She settled for a quick bow and a mumbled apology and he nodded curtly before turning his back to her, arms crossed and walking over to Machiavelli, hearing the light footsteps of the recruit disappearing down the hallway.

He sat down in the chair with a grimace, as the movement upset his more than likely cracked ribs - he had yet to go see a doctor - and Claudia had been the one to fix him up when he stumbled into the hideout yesterday, all the while cursing him for being a reckless idiot. "So, what's next?" Ezio demanded with a cocky grin, thus successfully distracting Machiavelli from commenting on his injuries.

"This," he simply said and handed Ezio a letter which he quickly read, his expression becoming ever more worried.

Finally he looked up, troubled. "This comes at a very bad time. But I can't refuse to lend my help to the Medici, not when our families have been friends for so many years."

"They are important supporters to our cause," Machiavelli agreed. "And the reward they're promising for your help is dearly needed."

"But what about Bartolomeo? I had planned on helping him get rid of these French bastardi."

"If you make haste, you'll be back in less than two weeks. He will be able to hold his position for that long, we'll make sure of that."

Ezio nodded. Right. He wasn't alone anymore. He had a whole Brotherhood to rely on now, and he should probably get used to the idea that he didn't have to handle everything on his own anymore. He could even send a recruit to fulfil this assassination contract, but the friendship between the Auditore and Medici family compelled him to do this himself.

"Then I'll be on my way," he said and got up from the chair, unsuccessfully trying to suppress a wince when the movement sent a sharp pain through his chest again. Maybe he should go see a doctor before he departed after all.

Machiavelli seemed to be of the same opinion. "Be careful, Ezio," he cautioned and the Assassin sent him a reassuring smile.

"Aren't I always?" With that, he strode out of the room, his dignified exit a bit tarnished by the slight limp he failed to hide.

"You're leaving?"

Ezio put the last of his supplies in the saddlebag and carefully closed it before turning around, a small smile on his lips. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Veronica avoided looking at him directly, instead inspecting his horse. "You've packed enough for a few days of travel," she observed quietly, so unlike her usual boisterous, confident self that it almost made Ezio feel guilty about reprimanding her so harshly this morning, but only almost.

"A friend in Firenze needs my help," he explained while checking the gear of the horse. He winced when he bent over a bit too far and his ribs protested again, despite having a healing salve applied and now being neatly bandaged by a doctor - who had also warned him to take it easy in his old age. Tontolone.

"Maybe you should rest a bit." That woman couldn't help but share her opinion. It seemed like she had already forgotten about mimicking the despondent recruit.

Ezio held back a comment about how he would have more than likely escaped unscathed if it hadn't been for her and his attempt to lure the guards away. She had learned her lesson, no need to rub salt in the wound. Instead, he adopted a carefree smile. "There's no rest for the wicked." He saw her sceptical look and sighed. "I'll be fine. If a little fall could kill me, I would have been dead a long time ago."

He reached out and ruffled her hair, much to her exasperation. "Now, be a good little recruit and go back to your training. I want to see some results when I get back." He gave her a very suggestive look, then swung himself upon his horse and galloped away, right through a group of thieves who called insults after him, grinning and leaving a flustered Veronica behind.

Ezio hated to admit it, but he had probably pushed himself too far after all. He might have already made the journey from Roma to Firenze in three days, but that was when he was healthy and, he grudgingly thought, a bit younger.

He was completely exhausted when he finally trotted through the gates of Firenze, only his pride holding him upright instead of slumping over the neck of his loyal horse while the last rays of the setting sun illuminated his back. Maybe he should have

listened to the advice of his friends and doctor after all and taken it a bit easier, but his inner restlessness had driven him on to complete this mission as fast as possible. He was more worried about leaving the Brotherhood to fend for itself than he admitted, even though he knew Machiavelli would take good care of everyone. He had a feeling Bartolomeo would need his help sooner rather than later, even though the man, at least as proud as Ezio himself, would never admit that the French were forcing him onto the defensive.

Weary from the journey and his injuries and his mind still back in Roma, he didn't see the attack coming. One moment he was still sitting on his horse, trotting through the streets of Firenze in search of an inn he could stay in, and the next moment he lay flat on his back, having been pulled from said horse.

Lucky for him his instincts kicked in the same moment the pain registered, and he quickly rolled to his side, despite his protesting ribs, thus narrowly avoiding the sword that tried to decapitate him. A moment later he was on his feet and his sword in his hands, already blocking and countering the next strike with ease, taking advantage of their surprise that he had recovered so fast and cutting the first of the six down in a mere second.

The others took a weary step back, no one willing to make the first attack and risk going down like their comrade, despite still overpowering him five to one.

"What is it you want?" Ezio demanded, his brow furrowed and feigned an attack to keep them at bay. He had never been attacked out of the blue before, not when he had done nothing wrong and the Medici cape had given him additional protection, even after their reign had ended as they were still an influential family.

"Your death, Assassino," the most courageous one replied and attacked, but once again Ezio easily blocked the clumsy strike, twisted his wrist and disarmed his opponent in a heartbeat.

The Assassin smirked, holding his blade to his enemy's throat. "For that you have to become a lot better than this. Now answer me: who sent you?" It was clear to him that this attack had been ordered by someone knowing he'd come here. It had been too fast and well planned to be anything else, even if it had failed. And his opponents had the defined look of mercenaries; he should know as he worked with them too.

"Like we'd tell you," the one he still held at bay with his sword spit bravely, although Ezio could see the terror in his eyes.

He sighed. "So you don't know." He had expected that, but he was still a bit disappointed. He could never have any luck, could he? "Get out of here. The reward they promised is not worth your lives. Which I will definitely take if you linger," he promised and lightly poked his opponent as a warning, drawing a fine line of blood on his throat.

They stared at each other a moment longer, then at the body of their comrade, who had gone down in the blink of an eye despite them having the element of surprise, and finally backed up, their hands raised in surrender. Then they turned tail and ran for their lives.

Ezio sheathed his sword with a sigh and turned around to look for his horse that had wandered off during the struggle.

The arrow that pierced his right shoulder took him completely by surprise.

## Kapitel 6: Ezio Auditore, 1503

It had already been late when Ezio had arrived in Firenze. Now, as he stumbled through the mostly deserted streets of the city in which he had grown up, night had fallen for good and covered everything in shadows, including the Assassin, much to his convenience. He didn't need to see his way to know where he was going, being so familiar with the layout of his home city, but it sure helped to shake off any possible pursuers.

Pain spiked through his shoulder and he grit his teeth, heavily leaning on the wall behind him for support, trying to get his bearings back and stop the trembling that stubbornly had taken control of his body. He might have taken out the one responsible for this wound - he was thankful Mario had insisted he learned to throw a knife as skilfully with his left as with his right hand - but being attacked twice in a row had made him very cautious of any other possible ambushes. He wouldn't survive another fight, not in his condition. He needed to both get to safety and his wound treated, all without raising too much attention.

And there was only one person in this whole city he could trust with all that. With a tremendous effort, costing him the last of his willpower, he pushed himself off the wall and staggered to the corner of the street, quickly glancing around to make sure it was as deserted as the one he was hiding in, and then continued his way along the wall of the building until he finally reached the door. He let go of his shoulder just long enough to knock exactly five times, as he had always done when he visited, then slumped against the wall and waited, willing his legs to bear his weight just a little longer and ignoring the sweat drops that landed in his eyes, making his vision a bit fuzzy.

Then the door finally opened and the sleepy face of his friend appeared, already in his nightclothes and turned into one of shock the moment he saw his wound. "Ezio!" The Assassin tried for a reassuring smile, but he wasn't sure if it worked, for the next moment the black spots hovering in the perimeter of his vision expanded and he collapsed on the threshold.

He would only remember bits and pieces of the week that followed. Someone poking at his hurt shoulder. His inability to defend himself. A cup of water at his lips and the nasty taste of some broth. The cool feeling of a damp cloth on his forehead. Soothing words, softly spoken to him, even though he couldn't understand for the life of him what they were saying. Flashes of a very familiar face, constantly wearing a worried frown, something his instinct told him was very unnatural on said face, even if he didn't recognize it.

And pain. Lots of pain, foremost in his shoulder, but really everywhere: his head, his ribs, his arms and legs and his back. There was not a part of him that didn't hurt. Even breathing was painful as if his lungs were on strike, refusing to work anymore.

Being unconscious was a blessing, so he never stayed awake for very long, always preferring to return to the soothing black void, safely away from the pain.

But he had to return to the world of the living eventually and his caretaker made sure of that, after a very long week. The Assassin finally awakened, for real this time, his mind more or less clear, and above all, without feeling any pain besides maybe a little soreness, something he was more than used to.

Sitting up was a bad idea though, as he quickly realized as the sharp pain went through his shoulder and chest, and he sank back onto his pillow with a low groan. "Ezio?" Light footsteps could be heard approaching and a moment later a very familiar and very welcome face appeared above him, breaking into a radiant smile. "Thank God, you're finally awake."

"More like thank Leonardo, isn't it?" he rasped, smiling despite his dry throat and his friend hurried to help him sit up and then passed him a glass of water, carefully keeping a hand on his shoulder to make sure he wouldn't fall over.

Despite his pride, Ezio was grateful for the help. He felt weak, almost as bad as he had after the Borgia had overrun Monteriggioni and shot him. He took careful sips, remembering that it would do him no good to give into his urge to gulp the water down, and didn't protest when the painter took the glass out of his hand, even though he was still thirsty.

"The dottore merits your thanks more than me. It was him that treated your wound," Leonardo explained, as humble as ever.

"And it was Messer da Vinci that cared for you afterwards," a gruff voice interjected, startling both Leonardo and Ezio quite a bit and thus proving that the Assassin wasn't fit yet, since it was normally impossible to catch him by surprise.

"Lodovico! How many times do I have to remind you to stop sneaking up on me like that. You're worse than Ezio!" the inventor reprimanded the young man, but Ezio could clearly hear the amused undertone, as did Lodovico, whose smile could even be seen under his hood.

"As often as it takes." He lightly bowed in Ezio's direction. "Messer Ezio. It's good to see you awake at last."

Ezio nodded. "It's good to see you too, Lodovico. How are things holding up?"

"Everything is under control," the recruit smiled.

Leonardo looked from one assassin to the other, before he turned to Ezio, a little indignant. "Wait, you're not surprised to see him?"

Ezio smiled. "How could I if it was me who sent him here in the first place?"

The inventor blinked in surprise. Then he frowned when he understood what was going on. "You're keeping tabs on me?"

"We're trying to keep you safe, Messer Da Vinci," Lodovico corrected quietly and Ezio nodded, smiling apologetically at his friend.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I didn't want you to worry."

But Leonardo was not one to hold a grudge and smiled. "Why would it worry me? It's reassuring to have a protector lurking in your shadow," he joked, before adding a bit more seriously. "You should have told me though. I'm sure it's more comfortable in here than perched on the windowsill outside."

"I probably thought you'd have enough of assassins after knowing me," Ezio replied jokingly, but with a slight undertone of seriousness which the sharp inventor didn't miss, of course.

He smiled warmly and put a hand on his shoulder. "You know you're always welcome here, Ezio. As are your friends." Then he turned to Lodovico and added in a lighter tone, "I guess you're taking turns stalking me?" The recruit nodded and Leonardo smiled at Ezio. "Then please tell them to show themselves to me. Who knows, I might even be able to convert them! Francesco seemed to be really intrigued by my paintings when he last visited me for his Hidden Bolt."

"Then I think it might be better to entirely keep them away from you. I can't let you steal my recruits after all," Ezio replied, a bit surprised by Leonardo's words.

Fransesco had never struck him as the creative type, being a silent young man with a no-nonsense attitude, but then again that was his assassin personality. Growing a bit more serious, he finally asked the question that had bugged him ever since he woke. "So, what exactly did I miss?"

Leonardo and Lodovico exchanged looks, before the inventor decided to take it upon him to tell the tale. "You really scared me when you collapsed on my threshold. Lucky for both of us though, Lodovico had heard of the attack and chose that moment to make his appearance, nearly giving me a heart attack in the process," he shot the recruit a look, who only grinned a bit ruefully, "but together we managed to get you inside where I took care of your wound as best as I could since Lodovico found it too risky to call for a doctor, not knowing what was going on. It didn't really work out though. The wound became infected."

Lodovico continued the tale, his arms crossed before his chest. "By then I had contacted Maestro Machiavelli, telling him what happened, and he asked me to inform Messer Medici. When I did, he immediately sent out his personal physician to help your recovery. And just in time, for your condition had worsened by then."

Ezio nodded thoughtfully. "It seems I have many debts to repay." He looked at his recruit. "You have stayed in contact with the Medici?"

Lodovico nodded. "Sì. I have scouted ahead to locate the enemy they asked you to kill, but I waited for you to wake up before making a move."

"So the only thing left to do is take him out?"

Lodovico nodded.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Ezio made to swing his legs out of bed, his exhaustion completely forgotten in the heat of the moment, but was halted by an unrelenting hand clamping on his shoulder. He looked up in the unusual stern face of Leonardo.

"We are waiting for you to recover, which is exactly what you will do. I won't allow you to destroy the progress you made."

Ezio was too surprised to protest when the inventor made him lie back down, not even thinking of telling him that he was in no position to order him around. After all, he really was, even if it was hard to admit.

Leonardo smiled to take the sharpness out of his words. "Lodovico did all the preparations by himself, don't you think he deserves to finish this mission?"

The inventor had chosen his words very carefully, saying "deserve" instead of "ought to", thus appealing to Ezio's pride to not steal the kill and at the same time making sure not to sound patronizing. The Assassin was well aware of the fact that the painter was manipulating him, that sly bastardo, but he was right. Again.

Therefore, he gave in with a heavy sigh. "Alright. Lodovico, I leave it to you. Be careful. If the mission could wait a week, there is no need to rush it now."

"I won't fail, Messer Ezio." Lodovico bowed, then turned around and disappeared through the open window, the same way he had entered.

Leonardo sighed. "At least you still use the door."

"You're the worst patient I've ever seen." Leonardo let out an exasperated sigh as Ezio kept pacing, unfazed by Leonardo's protests to stay in bed. The dottore who had come earlier this morning to check up on him and change his bandages may have ordered him to stay in bed, but he wouldn't be him if he didn't blatantly ignore that advice. Besides, he had lost a lot of respect for doctors since the time they had started calling him old.

"That's not hard since your usual patients are already dead," Ezio answered amusedly

and stopped for a moment to browse through Leonardo's books. Finding nothing that spiked his interest, he continued his pacing, much to the inventor's chagrin when he couldn't concentrate on his work even if he wanted to.

"And after having to deal with you, I know why I prefer them that way. Now stop worrying and sit down at least. Lodovico will be fine."

The Assassin finally relented and sat down at the opposite end of the table from where Leonardo was sitting, and more importantly, from where he could keep an eye on the window, and started to drum his fingers on the table.

The inventor shot him a pointed look. "You should have more trust in your recruits." He knew that. And he also knew they were all more than capable enough to handle the missions he assigned them, he had made sure of that himself, but he couldn't help but worry. All the more after what had happened to Nico. He had the urge to do every slightly more challenging mission himself, to make sure his recruits stayed safe, but that was, of course, impossible. There was way too much to do to handle everything on his own.

"What happened?"

Ezio looked up in surprise to see Leonardo watching him, concern as clear as the day in his light eyes. It shouldn't surprise him that the inventor had read his mood as easily as an open book. Not only had they known each other for over two decades now, but the man was a real genius. Sometimes a bit scatter-brained maybe, but nonetheless very observant, with the sharpest mind Ezio had ever had the luck to encounter.

He hesitated a moment, but then decided to simply tell the curious inventor. Not only because he would immediately spot any lie Ezio could try to feed him, but foremost because he was his friend. So, he told him what had happened prior to his departure for Firenze.

Leonardo was silent for a long while before he finally spoke, carefully choosing his words which told Ezio more than anything how serious the usually rambling inventor was. "You can't save everyone, Ezio. I know you know, but you need to accept it, too. You're doing all you can and I assure you, you're making a difference, but you can't be everywhere at once. And most of all, you can't do what you have to while bearing the burden of the dead as well as the living." He smiled reassuringly, reaching across the table to pat his hand. "You're not alone in this, Ezio."

The Assassin nodded, feeling better than he had in days. Talking about his worries had helped as much as hearing Leonardo's words. "And I'm very grateful for that. Thank you, amico mio."

The serene moment was destroyed when Lodovico swung himself through the window and nearly gave them both a heart attack.

Leonardo frowned at the recruit. "Why can't you use the door like a normal person?" Lodovico cocked his head. "Because I am no normal person, Messer da Vinci, I am an assassin. Besides, if you wanted me to use the door, why leave the window open?"

Ezio chuckled at that. Seemed like his recruit had quite the gift of gab. "I assume the mission went according to plan?"

"Sì. The target is dead, the Medici are happy and we are somewhat richer. Everyone is better off. Except for the target, of course, but since he was a Templar, I don't think it matters all that much."

"A Templar?" That revelation somehow destroyed the relaxed atmosphere as both Ezio and Leonardo leaned forward, interested.

Lodovico pulled a ring out of his bag and laid it on the table in front of them so that the Templar insignia was clearly visible. "He had this on him."

"So much for having some peace and quiet here in Firenze," Leonardo sighed. It was Ezio's turn to send his friend a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, we'll make sure no one will bother you."

Keeping his friend safe after all, was the least he could do after what Leonardo had done for him, not only this time around, but every time really. And taking care of his friends was something Ezio took very serious.

A few days later, Ezio finally felt good enough to depart, even if neither the doctor, nor Leonardo, agreed and would have liked to keep him confined to his bed a bit longer. But he was growing restless, and not even his friend could manage to hold him when his thoughts were already back in Roma.

"Be careful," Leonardo said with a worried smile and when they clasped hands in goodbye, not even Ezio's reassuring squeeze managed to make the inventor feel better.

"You too. I've sent for Fransesco to keep an eye on you, but please don't seduce him into becoming a painter, alright?"

That finally earned him the warm grin he was used to. "I won't make any promises," Leonardo answered with a wink, then Ezio finally got on his horse and the long and slow journey back to Roma began.

And it was thanks to the inventor it stayed slow the whole way, he had made sure of that by sending Lodovico along to keep an eye on him and make sure that he didn't push himself too hard, setting a slow pace with numerous breaks and ignoring Ezio's complaints about being perfectly capable of going faster.

The next time he saw Leonardo, he really needed to ask him how he kept his very own recruits under control and made them ignore even his wishes. But despite all the complaining, he was secretly grateful Lodovico didn't give in, for at the end of the day he was always exhausted to the brink of passing out and his shoulder and ribs hurt all the more from the jolting they received on horseback.

Due to that slow pace, it took them a good week to make it back, which was plenty of time to think about what had happened in Firenze. He didn't like it one bit, but it was obvious that someone had tipped his attackers off that he would travel to his home city, or else he wouldn't have been ambushed right after his arrival. Word tended to spread that he was in the city, but only after he did something to warrant such attention, and he had certainly lain low, no different than any other traveller.

Which meant that there really was a traitor in their ranks, since it hadn't been known to all that many that he had this mission. If La Volpe found out, Ezio would probably have to hold him back from jumping Machiavelli's throat. He trusted the man and needed to find out as soon as possible who was responsible for this, before anything else happened, or the Brotherhood started to fall apart thanks to the distrust in his ranks.

He was relieved when they finally arrived in Roma, three weeks later than he had anticipated when he had set out, and even Lodovico seemed happy to be back as he didn't protest for once when Ezio picked up the pace.

Unfortunately, the good mood didn't last all that long when Machiavelli welcomed them with an unusually grave face. "Bartolomeo won't be able to hold the fronts against the French for much longer," he immediately came to the point, not even waiting for Ezio to get out of his saddle. "Their force, combined with that of the Borgia, is simply too much."

Ah, sweet Roma. It seemed the city had missed him as much as he had. Hearing the

news, he simply unfastened the saddlebags, not even bothering to get off the horse. "I'll see to it immediately. Tell the recruits to ready themselves and come to the caverns. I might need their assistance."

With that, he turned his horse around and rode on, Lodovico not far behind, leaving a rather surprised Machiavelli.

Defending the caverns and then taking down the Baron, while at the same time making sure Pantasilea was kept safe was no easy task, especially with his only partially healed shoulder and ribs, but with the help of his recruits he managed. Well, the fact that his opponents tended to underestimate him when they saw his bandaged shoulder helped too. It was a good thing Mario had made sure he was ambidextrous.

It had been a very long, yet very successful day for the Assassins. With the Baron gone, Cesare's army was in disarray and that, coupled with the loss of his funds after the death of his Banker, now made him much more vulnerable. The time had come to strike directly at the thread puller of the Borgia, and La Volpe had already found a possible way in.

But that had to wait until tomorrow. After the long travel and very exciting day, he was on the brink of passing out from exhaustion. That his shoulder and ribs hurt like hell after having been strained this much didn't add to his comfort.

He was more than ready to fall into his bed and not get up again till much, much later, but he still had to get his armour off. And with only one hand, it was no easy task.

Ezio was on the brink of ignoring the dottore's order to keep his shoulder still once again - after all he had done today it wouldn't make much of a difference - when he heard the door open. Light footsteps approached and a moment later skilled fingers were helping him out of his armour.

"And here I thought you had finally learned to ask for help," Veronica softly reprimanded him as she hung his chest plate upon the holder.

"Why ask for it when it is provided on its own?" Ezio answered with a smirk as she got his arm guards off.

She rolled her eyes. "So you knew I was coming?"

"What can I say? I draw in pretty women like the fire draws in moths."

She pinched his arm as she helped him out of his robe and carelessly threw it in a corner. "You won't need this anymore."

Ezio, finally rid of all his armour, lifted a suggestive eyebrow. "Is that so?"

She only smiled as she lightly pushed him backwards to the bed, and he readily sat down as she climbed on his lap, one hand toying with his hair, the other trailing down his unhurt shoulder while his left hand rested on her waist, lightly caressing it. "I am quite sure."

Ezio blinked at her unusually predatory tone. He was quite used to her flirting by now, but this was new and off somehow. It was the only warning he got before she pushed him back on the bed, and it was only his fast reflexes when he saw the light glinting off metal that made it possible to grab her wrist before she slit his throat with the knife she now held.

He glared at her as the realization dawned on him. "You are the traitor."

"Yes, I am." Her eyes glinted, this time not with amusement, but pure hatred. "And if it weren't for that incompetent fool in Firenze, I wouldn't have to clean up after him." She put her second hand on the knife, doubling her force and making it that much harder for Ezio to counter with his hurt shoulder. He was lucky he had caught her

wrist with a straight arm, or he wouldn't stand much of a chance, compromised as he was.

He needed to get the upper hand, catch her off guard. His best bet was to distract her, make her loose her focus. "Then why did you wait till now? You could have saved Cesare's generals." Then his eyes narrowed as he realized something else. "You tried to warn the Banker, didn't you?"

"Yes, but then Rodrigo called me off. Sacrificing his own people just to teach Cesare a lesson, I was a fool to follow his orders until now. Cesare is a much worthier leader of the Templars than he ever was!"

Her rage increased the power behind her pushing and Ezio grimaced as it got ever harder to keep the knife away from him. Well, at least she wasn't thinking clearly anymore, that had to help. Then he had an idea. He just hoped he was right.

"You mean he's that good in bed? I thought he spent all his time with that sister of his."

She screamed in rage and put all her weight behind the knife, which was exactly what he had anticipated. He hooked his legs around her, grit his teeth as he grabbed her elbow with his right arm, ignoring the soaring pain in his shoulder and ribs, and flipped them around while twisting the wrist holding the knife until she let go of it.

Now it was his turn to be on top and hold a knife at her throat. He hesitated a moment. "It hurts me to do this, Veronica. I really liked you."

She stopped struggling and smiled that sweet smile that had spiked his interest in the first place, accepting her fate. "I know. That was the plan after all."

He slit her throat and watched the light in her eyes fade as her life energy slowly left her body. "I'll pray that you'll find true love in the next life. Requiescat in Pace."

Ezio stayed until the pyre had completely burned down before returning to the hideout. Veronica may have been a Templar agent, but in death they were all the same and the assassins treated even their enemies with respect.

He also felt as if he was saying goodbye to more than just the woman. She may have played with him from the very beginning, but his affection for her had been real. It hadn't been love, of that he was sure. He hadn't loved anyone since Cristina, and until now he had been sure he never would again. But even though it hadn't been real, Veronica had still helped him see that not all was lost.

Therefore, this was as much a goodbye to her as it was finally a goodbye to his lost love, something he hadn't even realized he hadn't accepted till now. And for that he was grateful, would it finally help him to move on.

When he entered the hideout, the whole Brotherhood was waiting for him: Machiavelli, La Volpe, Bartolomeo, his sister and of course his recruits, old and new, that had joined the order in his absence and, according to Machiavelli, were very promising.

He smiled at what he considered to be his family and straightened up. Now there was only one thing left to do to finally liberate Roma once and for all.

"Our next target will be Cesare."

## Kapitel 7: Desmond Miles, 2012

After logging out of the Animus, Desmond just stayed put for a couple of seconds, blinking to get rid of the grey fog that was surrounding him and hoping that the throbbing in his head would maybe lessen a bit at the same time. No such luck, of course - not that he had had much hope to begin with.

Well, at least he managed to get rid of the fog and got out of his eagle's eyes mode that tended to activate on its own when he did so as Ezio.

A bottle of water and two aspirin appeared in his field of vision and he blinked up at the merciful soul.

Rebecca smiled. "You seem like you need it."

"Thank you," he nodded and finally sat up to wash the pills down with a couple of large gulps, emptying the bottle without even putting it down once. He immediately felt a little better. Animus sessions tended to dehydrate him quite a bit and not even aspirin could heal that.

But something was amiss and after a moment he realized what bothered him. "Where is Lucy?" After all, it was normally her that played the mother hen when it came to his health, not Rebecca, and hers was usually the first worried face to see when he came out of the Animus.

"Getting supplies. She should be back soon though," answered Rebecca and got up, stretching with a sigh. "How about some spaghetti carbonara? Shaun made some and it's actually pretty good."

The historian scoffed at that. "Why do you sound so surprised? I am perfectly able to cook some pasta, thank you very much."

"Because the British have a weird sense of taste. I mean, who puts vinegar on fries?"

"How is that any worse than putting tons of ketchup and mayonnaise on them?", he countered, and while the two continued their bickering, Desmond made his way to the kitchen corner and helped himself to a big serving of the spaghetti and heated it up again.

After he took a first bite, he couldn't help but add his grain of salt to the still on-going conversation about the pros and cons of British cooking. "This *really* is good. Maybe we should make Shaun our official cook, at least as long as he lays off the vinegar, of course."

*"What is// it with you people and the vinegar?" Shaun exclaimed exasperatedly before pointedly turning back to his screen, deeming this conversation unworthy of his further input.*

*Rebecca gave Desmond a thumbs-up and winked at him when she came over to sit with him, after grabbing a can of Coke from the fridge. "We're a pretty good team, eh?", she whispered conspiratorially, but loud enough for Shaun to still hear her. He shot them a poisonous look which only made the engineer grin wider and Desmond chuckle.*

*"So, how are you holding up?" she added, a bit more serious and scrutinized him.*

*Desmond lifted an eyebrow. "Fine. Let me guess: Lucy put you up to this."*

*"To what?" Her tone was far too innocent to not be fake.*

*"Playing the mother hen in her absence."*

*She leaned back in her chair, looking more than a little sheepish. Bull's eye. "You know how she doesn't take no for an answer," she explained and Desmond couldn't help but grin at that.*

"Hell yes, I know." He took another mouthful of spaghetti, before adding a bit more seriously this time: "She worries too much. I can handle it." After all, he had successfully ignored Ezio's shadow so far. As long as he ignored it, it wasn't really there, right?

"That's what I told her, too!" Rebecca exclaimed. Then she waited until he had finished eating and grudgingly added, "She still made me promise to send you to bed, though." Desmond lifted an eyebrow, amused, and got up to put his empty plate in the sink, on top of the others waiting to be washed. "Is that so?" He looked at his watch. 3 p.m. He hummed. "I guess I'll comply. It's already late. Or early." Whatever. Their rhythm was pretty messed up.

He chuckled as Rebecca heaved a sigh of relief, not having to face Lucy's wrath when she came back, and he made his way over to their sleeping corner. He was exhausted, or else he wouldn't have given in that easily, and his head was still trying to kill him. There was no way he could get back in the Animus and there was nothing else to do but sleep, since he couldn't go outside during the day.

So sleep it was. He crashed on his cot, not bothering to change out of his clothes, and a minute later he was fast asleep.

Desmond woke up from nightmares about having to kill all of his recruits when they turned out to be traitors and then having to explain the slaughter to a very disappointed Leonardo who wouldn't believe him. Of course he didn't feel all that well rested when he got up, his hands trembling a bit from the memory. The memory of a nightmare about his ancestor's memories. If that wasn't fucked up, he didn't know.

He silently got up, as not to wake the others who were for once all still fast asleep, and crept to where his bag stood, taking a fresh hoodie out and throwing the old one in their washing basket.

Then he looked at his watch and noticed it was only 9 p.m., which left him with at least another three hours of free time. It took him only one second to decide what to do next. With a last glance back to his friends, he grabbed his duffle bag and left the Sanctuary, leaving the earpiece behind.

Standing in the entrance of the room, Desmond took in the sight, new yet so very familiar. No matter where you went, pubs were basically the same, be it in New York, or the little city of Colle di Val D'elsa in the middle of nowhere in Italy. This Bar Arnolfo wasn't an exception, with the sound of lots of different voices intermingling, the occasional laughing and the clinking of glasses, Sultans of Swing playing in the background, the hotness of the day combining with the sweat to make the air heavy, and oh, how he had missed it.

He hadn't known what made him come here. One moment he was standing in front of the still open gate of Monteriggioni, trying and failing to resist the oh-so-tempting call of freedom, and the next he was sitting on the next bus driving to the nearest city. He guessed it was his instincts that led him straight to this place.

Avoiding thinking what that might mean to his mental state, he finally moved from his place in the door and entered the pub, only feeling slightly guilty about being here in the first place. If he didn't stay too long, no one would be the wiser and he could just slip back in the Sanctuary without anyone noticing.

Yeah right. Like he ever was that lucky. But still, he needed the time out, and if he could run around Monteriggioni at night without being spotted by the Templars, he felt pretty safe in a pub full of strangers.

"Mi porta una birra, per favore," he ordered when the bartender looked in his direction,

*not even blinking at his smooth Italian. He had figured it was just another side effect from his prolonged time in the Animus, and a rather good one at that. At least that's what he had tried to explain to Lucy when she had thrown a fit the last time he used his newly acquired language skills without even noticing.*

*When he got his beer he looked around for a place to sit, but the pub was fairly full, it seeming to be the hangout of the city. Luckily he had inherited some of his ancestor's Italian looks, so he didn't stand out all that much compared to the locals.*

*"Hello stranger. You're looking a bit lost, want to come sit with me?"*

*Well, so much for that. But he didn't mind all that much when he turned around and found himself being checked out by a pretty hot chick. She had the typical Italian look, dark eyes and even darker hair that fell in long curls down her back, a promising smile on her full, red lips.*

*A charming smile immediately lit up his face in response. "I'd very much like to, belladonna."*

*She linked arms with him and led him to a free table for two in the back of the room where one had a clear view of the entrance. Apparently, she had been on the hunt this evening. Lucky him.*

*"So, what betrayed me?"*

*She shot him a questioning look and he grinned. "That I am not from here. Was it the looks or the accent?"*

*"Neither," she smiled and pointed to his glass beer. "But the locals don't usually drink beer. Besides, I'm here often enough to know the regulars."*

*He raised an eyebrow. "And why would a beautiful lady like you spend her time in this place?" He briefly wondered if that was really him flirting with this stranger or if it was yet again Ezio showing through, but he quickly dismissed the thought. He didn't care all that much either way. All that really mattered was that he was finally out of Monteriggioni and rid of his ancestor for at least a little while, since nothing here triggered any memories he related to his time spent in the Animus and thus he had no hallucinations about the Assassin for the first time in a while.*

*He was determined to make the most of his time and have as much fun as possible. And a beautiful woman like the one sitting opposite from him definitely counted as fun.*

*"Maybe to catch handsome strangers off guard," she readily flirted back and he took a sip from his beer to hide his triumphant grin. Jackpot.*

*The time passed all too fast flirting with the lovely Isabella and drinking some more beers, but even though he was starting to get anxious to get back, not wanting to worry his team too much, he couldn't bring himself to say goodbye to his regained freedom yet, even if it only was a momentary illusion. He even briefly toyed with the idea of simply disappearing and not going back at all, even though he knew all too well that that wouldn't be possible. Not necessarily because he wanted to save the world all that badly - he didn't really believe in the upcoming calamity yet - but because he knew that he would never be safe. No matter where he would run, the Templars would be hot on his heels and his freedom would stay an illusion. Besides, he couldn't leave his friends like that, even if they sometimes annoyed him to no end. They still relied on him, and he relied on them.*

*"How about we take this to a more ...private place?" Isabella suggested at that moment, a very seductive smile on her lips as she traced the tattoos on his left arm with her fingers, making him shiver.*

*He was about to open his mouth, not yet sure what his answer would be, when he was very rudely interrupted. "How about you bugger off so Desmond here and I can have a*

little chat?"

Desmond looked up at Shaun with wide eyes, a little scared of the deadly aura the man was displaying, which was quite impressive, knowing that he couldn't hurt a fly, except maybe with an old historical book.

Isabella wasn't as much impressed, as indignant at the interruption. "And who are you supposed to be?"

Shaun's smile was as sharp as Ezio's hidden blade when he answered. "His social worker. He did tell you he was on probation for theft and violence, didn't he?"

The reaction was instant. One moment she was still holding onto his arm, unwilling to let go of her nearly captured prey, the next the same hand went to her purse. She got up, every trace of her flirty smile vanished and went off without another word while Shaun took her place opposite Desmond.

"You really know how to drive women away," he couldn't help but comment, trying to delay the inevitable chewing out he would get soon enough.

But Shaun simply shot him a deadly look, which wasn't all that bad, seeing as Desmond was quite used to being on the receiving end of those. He even prided himself with the knowledge that Shaun would never have perfected that look without him being there for practice.

"I find it much more worrying that you of all people are even able to hit it off with women. What are they thinking?"

Before Desmond could even begin to formulate a good counter to that, Shaun snatched his beer, took a sip and grimaced. "And what the bloody hell is this supposed to be? The old bathwater of someone's grandmother?"

He pushed the glass back into Desmond's hands and ordered a double scotch from the passing waiter. "Can't have that conversation being completely sober", he murmured and Desmond looked at him questioningly. Of course Shaun ignored it, impatiently drumming his fingers on the surface of the table while waiting for his scotch to come and enjoying seeing Desmond get more and more uneasy by the minute. That was probably the only reason he wasn't getting ripped apart already. Sadistic bastard.

"How did you even find me?" he tried to distract himself from the upcoming explosion. Shaun looked around him. "Manly instinct. I knew if I just went to the most smelly place full of testosterone, I'd find you."

"You planted a tracking device on me, didn't you?" Desmond asked drily and Shaun rolled his eyes.

"Of course, genius. We couldn't have our last hope simply wandering off like that now, could we?" His tone was heavy with sarcasm, but there was something else too that Desmond couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Then where are the others?"

Shaun's scotch arrived and he didn't answer until he had taken a long sip, his eyes closed in pleasure, before he leaned back in his chair and fixed his eyes on Desmond. "At the hideout, trusting me to bring you back. I convinced them that since the mother hen approach had clearly failed, it was time for us men to have a real conversation."

Desmond lifted an eyebrow in puzzlement. "A men's talk? About what?"

"You slowly going mental for an example." Shaun shrugged, as if he wouldn't care either way.

Desmond went stiff and his eyes narrowed as his heartbeat picked up the pace. "I'm not going mental", he protested, planning to sound amused, but it came out sounding more like he was defending himself.

Shaun, of course, saw through it right away. He probably would have even if Desmond

hadn't been such a bad liar. That bastard was fucking observant.

"So you consider having all those hallucinations about Ezio to be completely normal? Or that you're slowly behaving more and more like him? I'm neither blind nor stupid, Desmond." There was it again, under all the condescension, that undertone of ...worry? No, that couldn't be right. Shaun didn't worry, least of all about him.

Desmond sighed, realizing that the time for denying it all was long over and took a long sip from his third beer this evening. Sadly, now that the mood was completely ruined, he couldn't help but agree that it didn't taste all that great. Go figure the historian could even spoil his last pleasure. "Do Rebecca and Lucy know?"

To his relief Shaun shook his head. "No. They're suspecting you're not doing very well with all the headaches you're having, but they don't know to what extent. Now, here's my question: how bad is it really? Do we need to start hiding all the sharp objects?"

Desmond winced and shook his head. He wouldn't go batshit insane as Sixteen had. He was having some trouble getting rid of Ezio, both the hallucinations and the memories that he sometimes couldn't tell apart from his own, but what did they expect, staying in this place full of memories in the first place? Still, he didn't feel like he'd go psychopath on them and that's what he told Shaun. "I do sometimes have trouble keeping my memories and his apart, but it normally gets better when I am out of the Animus and the Sanctuary for a while. I keep seeing him though, as long as I am in Monteriggioni. All the time in fact."

Shaun crossed his arm in front of his chest and shot him a calculating look. "But you don't see him here, right?" He shook his head and Shaun sighed, taking another sip of his scotch. "Well bugger. We need to get you out of here if we want you to stay sane, but once we do, you're not safe anymore. This is bloody brilliant."

Desmond shrugged, suddenly not all that concerned anymore and feeling a bit giddy with the knowledge how much his teammates cared about him. Even Shaun, though he expressed it in his very subtle, sarcastic way. "I'll manage. Once we locate the POE we can get out of here and I can take as many breaks as I wish."

"Right. And if it takes longer than anticipated, we're just going to use someone else to finish the job. Oh wait, we don't have someone else!" He fixed Desmond with a stern look. "You will take it easy. No complaints," he added before the assassin could even open his mouth. "We might even try to get out of Monteriggioni more often. This scotch really isn't half bad, even if it can't compare to a British one, of course."

Desmond understood the underlying piece-offering, and lifted his glass of beer. "We'll just have to celebrate our victory in an English pub then, right?" He might not have complained all that much about the Bleeding Effect taking over, but he was still relieved that his teammates were fine with cutting him some slack to get his bearings back. He might not go and paint symbols on walls, but it wasn't very comfortable sharing a mind with a long dead ancestor either.

Shaun smirked. "You really think you could handle some real beer?"

Finally things were looking up again, and not even Shaun's condescending remarks could pull him down. They would win this and then he would be free again to enjoy his beers when and where he pleased.

When they finally returned to the hideout, Desmond was determined to find the Apple and put an end to the war against the Templars. He smiled when he got into the Animus. It was time to save the world.