

S N E A K P E E K



LAUNCHING ANIMUS v4.35

Loading firmware...

Verifying subject...

//SimonHathaway

Status...OK*

,[Inspecting Abstergo database]*

Upload in progress.

Initiate regression...

Synchronicity achieved

Transference minimal

Safe to proceed

WELCOME TO THE ANIMUS

Locating coordinates...

51.505391, -0.150501

48.442137, 5.674540



ASSASSIN'S CREED

HERESY

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

PROLOGUE



The autumnal night's chill sliced through the man's thin shirt as he fled, feet flying over first the concrete pathway, then the manicured grass of the rooftop's park. *Why did I come up here?* he thought, wildly and far too late. *I'm a bloody rat in a trap.*

The Templars were behind him.

They knew where he had fled. And they knew, as he did, that other than the lift and the two stairways from which they now emerged with grim and silent purpose, there was no way off this roof.

Think. Think!

Thinking had saved him before, many a time. He'd always relied on logic, on rationality, on analysis, to solve every predicament that life in all its sadistic whimsy had thrown him, but now it was of no use to him at all.

The deadly percussion of gunfire exploded behind him. *Trees*, his rational mind shouted, and the logic saved him. He altered his path, zigzagging to make himself an unpredictable target, careening erratically like a drunken man toward the trees and shrubberies, statuary and now-vacant ice cream and beverage stalls that would shield him from the hail of bullets.

But it would only delay the inevitable.

He knew very well what the Templars were capable of. And he knew what they wanted. They were not coming to question him, or capture him. They were intent on killing him, and therefore, very, very soon, he would be dead.

He was not without a weapon himself, one that was ancient and powerful. A Sword of Eden, which had known the grip of both Templars and Assassins through the centuries. He had used it earlier. It was strapped to his back, its weight calming and reassuring, and he would leave it there. It would not serve him now.

The Templars were single-minded of purpose, dedicated only to dominance and death—his. There was only one way out, and it would be a bloody miracle if it worked.

His heart was slamming against his chest, his lungs heaving, his body taxed to its limit because in the end, he was only human, wasn't he, no matter what kind of training he had, no matter what sort of DNA was floating about in his blood. And he didn't slow, *couldn't* slow, couldn't allow that logical, analytical, rational brain of his to interrupt the signals from the deep primal instinct of survival. Couldn't let his brain overrule his body.

Because his body knew what was called for. And it knew how to do it.

A tree branch exploded right beside him. Splinters grazed his face, drawing blood.

The fate offered by the Templars behind him was one of heartless certainty. The stone roof that encircled the edge of the rooftop garden of the London office of Abstergo Industries offered a wild, desperate chance.

If he had the faith to take it.

He didn't slow. As he approached the wall, he surged forward, clearing it like a runner would a hurdle, his long legs pedaling in the air as he arched his back, spread his arms—

—and leaped.

CHAPTER ONE



Torchlight capered over the stone walls of the chamber, casting grotesquely distorted shadows over the iron-banded wooden door and the life-sized portrait of the greatest Templar Grand Master who had ever lived. The Postulate, clad in a white vestment with a second, heavier outer red robe, gazed up at the image of the white-bearded face that regarded him, the eyes kind, the pose strong.

A voice spoke in the silence, rich and smooth and deep. “Jacques de Molay was the last public Grand Master of the Order of the Knights Templar. He was falsely accused of heresy by unscrupulous men. Men interested not in the betterment of humanity, but only in their own selfish desires. The best of us confessed to the worst of crimes; crimes he did not commit. His enemies, and history, believed the Order had died with him. It did not.”

The Master Templar stepped into the chamber to stand beside the Postulate. “Jacques de Molay died, in agony, so that the Order might live—safely, in secret, known only to those who also would gladly die for it.”

The Postulate looked into the Master's dark eyes. "Be humble as dust and still as stone," the Master said. He stretched out a gloved hand, and pointed toward the marble floor. The Postulate lowered himself so he lay face down on the cold stone, arms stretched out to either side, in the form of a cross.

"You will pass through the shadows of the night alone with the Father of Understanding. May he strip from you all that does not strengthen the Order, and clothe you with certainty. May he empty you, and refill you with purpose. Sleep not, dream not. As the day breaks, we will come for you. If we find you worthy, we shall elevate you. If we find you lacking, we shall turn our backs upon you. May the Father of Understanding guide you."

The Postulate heard the soft sounds of slipped feet and the creak, slam, and click of the door as it was closed and locked.

He was alone, with only one way out—through that door, as a Member of the Inner Sanctum.

If he failed.... No. He would not consider the option.

There was no danger of sleep. The torches provided light, but no warmth, and the marble leeched his body heat despite his double layer of ritual clothing. Time, aloof and leisurely, stretched out, unmoved by one man's discomfort. After what seemed like an eternity, the welcome rattle of the skeleton key in the door came at last. The Postulate was hoisted by his arms and bit back a hiss of pain; lying motionless for several hours on the merciless stone had taken its toll.

He followed the pair that had lifted him to his feet in silence. The Postulate still strode upon stone, but now, it was hard slate. They passed beneath an arched gateway of brick and rock. The large tree trunks flanking it stretched upward, disappearing into the darkness, extending past the reach of the faint light of torches flickering in their sconces.

Robed, cowed figures awaited him. Although each held a beeswax candle, their faces remained swathed in darkness, save for the glint of eyes caught by firelight.

“The human body has its heart,” the Master Templar intoned. “The earth has its core. All things have a center, whence comes their deepest strength. The Templar Order, too, has its Inner Sanctum. Nine there must be, three times three; the ninth you shall become, if you are worthy. Speak now of three true things you learned about the order during your Vigil.”

The question caught the Postulate off guard. His mind went blank for a moment, then he spoke.

“I have learned that genuine knowledge only comes to those who truly hunger for it. I have learned that power must be wielded by those above the fray, for only they can see the interweaving of the pattern. And I have learned that wisdom is the execution of power guided by knowledge and understanding.”

There were no words spoken, but some of the Inner Sanctum members exchanged glances.

The Master Templar continued. “As all members of the Order are rare in this world, rarer still are those chosen to join the Inner Sanctum. You have already vowed to uphold the principles of our Order, and all that for which we stand. Will you travel deeper still into our core, and stand shoulder to shoulder beside the handful who will shape the world to its proper form? Do you swear to stay forever silent regarding what transpires here, to share what you know fully and completely with the Inner Sanctum, and never act against the heart of all it means to be a Templar?”

“The Father of Understanding guide me in this, as I so swear,” the Postulate replied.

For a long moment, the Master remained silent. Then he nodded. In unison, the others brought the candles up to their faces, allowing him to see them.

“You are now a member of the Inner Sanctum.” The Master Templar stepped forward, fastening a pin to the front of the Postulate’s robe. The long, silver needle was crafted to look like a sword, while a squat cross with a ruby in its center was affixed atop the sword’s hilt.

More than an ornament, the pin's sharp tip was coated in a toxin. It was to be used against an enemy if attacked... and used against oneself, if need be. When the pin was in place, the Templars blew out their candles' flames.

"Turn and greet your brethren, Simon Hathaway."

The torches, cunningly wrought holograms of fire, were instantly "extinguished" and the sconces retracted smoothly into alcoves in the gray slate walls. Small doors snicked shut to hide them. The lights came on, dim at first so their eyes could adjust. The stone structure on the left wall slowly slid aside with a slight humming sound, revealing a map of the world with small, twinkling lights. Each color represented a different area of activity for Abstergo Industries—and the Templar order.

Hoods were flipped back and ritual robes shrugged out of as the Inner Sanctum welcomed their newest member. Simon took a moment to run a hand along the heavy fabric of his ritual garb. It had been made by hand—complete with the sheep being hand-sheared and the wool carded, spun, and dyed by human labor, not machines. And the embroidery... Simon shook his head, amazed at the effort that had gone into ensuring the robe, which he would one day wear again at the induction of another new Inner Sanctum member, was as much like those worn by Templars in centuries past as possible. As a historian, he more than most valued the effort put toward authenticity.

He reluctantly traded his robe for his suit jacket, turning to his new comrades. All of them he knew to a greater or lesser extent: Laetitia England, a high-ranking executive in the Operations division. Despite her felicitous name, Laetitia was actually an American operating out of Philadelphia. Mitsuko Nakamura, Director of Lineage Research and Acquisition, divided her time between the Philadelphia office and the Abstergo Campus in Rome. Simon envied her fiercely for that. At Abstergo, "acquisition" had a rather different meaning than at other companies. The term referred to test subjects who

would be appropriate for the Animus, a glory of technology Simon had yet to experience.

Simon was more familiar with the artificially jovial Álvaro Gramática, of the Future Technologies division, and the thuggish Juhani Otso Berg. Both were presently on assignment in another part of the globe. Unable to be physically present, they had nonetheless witnessed Simon's induction, and their faces now gazed down at the room from a pair of large screens.

The two men had worked with Simon's predecessor and boss, the late Isabelle Ardant. Isabelle had been killed by an Assassin a little over a year prior. Simon hadn't particularly liked her; he didn't particularly like or dislike *anybody*, really, but they'd attended Cambridge together, and a fellow Cantabrigian Templar shouldn't die stabbed in the back by someone too cowardly to face her. He harbored some resentment toward Berg, who had been acting as Isabelle's security the night she had died, and who really ought to have prevented her murder.

Also present were David Kilkerman, who had replaced the late and (to Simon at least) unlamented Warren Vidic as head of the Animus Project, and Alfred Stearns. Kilkerman was tall and heavyset, and laughed loudly and often, but his softness around the middle in no way indicated a soft nature. Stearns was the eldest member of the group of nine. He had been responsible for nearly eradicating the Assassin threat at the turn of the century in a Templar action that had been dubbed the "Great Purge." He had retired, and Laetitia had replaced him as Head of Operations, but he was still a highly valued member of the Inner Sanctum. They shook hands politely. Though Stearns was well into his eighties, balding, with a short snow-white beard, Simon thought the man as dangerous as any he'd ever met.

Agneta Reider, Chief Executive Officer of the Abstergo Financial Group, was someone else Simon was meeting for the first time. She was cool and pleasant, exactly the sort of person one would like to see at the helm of so vital an arm of Abstergo.

And of course, there was Alan Rikkin, CEO of Abstergo Industries, and the most important Templar Simon knew. Well, *knew* that he knew, at least. One was never certain about such things when it came to the Order.

Rikkin was the public face of Abstergo Industries. Simon would be hard-pressed to think of one better. Fiercely intelligent, presenting an utterly controlled demeanor, Rikkin commanded, and got, the world's attention when he spoke.

The door opened and two carts were wheeled in. The mystique of ages past retreated before pleasant, ordinary chitchat and the clatter of cups, saucers, knives, and forks as the Inner Sanctum settled in for a traditional English fry-up breakfast. Within a few moments it was as if the ritual, so steeped in tradition, had indeed happened centuries ago rather than in the twenty-first.

"How do you like your new office, Hathaway?" Mitsuko Nakamura asked.

"I'm not set up yet," Simon replied. He fished in his jacket pocket for his gold wire-rimmed spectacles and settled them atop an aquiline nose. "I thought it might be wisdom to make certain I was accepted into the Sanctum first. Save myself the trouble of packing things twice."

More laughter. "Practical," Álvaro Gramática said, his too-jovial face huge on the monitor. Isabelle hadn't been able to stand him, and Simon had to admit Alvaro fell heavily on the "dislike" end of his own personal scale. Now that Simon was Head of Historical Research, he would be seeing Gramática's smug almost-sneer much more often. Joy.

"A trait I hope to bring to the fore in the department," Simon replied politely, and dipped a soldier of perfectly crisp fried bread into the golden-orange yolk of his egg.

"We went through Isabelle's files and your name came up several times," Rikkin said. "You managed to impress her—no easy feat."

"Thank you, sir. I'm flattered. Isabelle was very good at what she

did, and I will try to serve the Order as well in my own fashion.”

“That sounds like you don’t approve of how Isabelle managed her department.” Although everyone else, including the Americans, was drinking tea during so traditional an English breakfast, Simon noted that it was coffee Rikkin stirred with a gleaming silver spoon, his dark eyes never leaving Simon’s face.

Simon settled his cup in its fragile saucer with a slight clink and addressed his employer. “While I respect Isabelle’s approach, I’m my own person, and I have a fresh angle I’d like to implement.”

“Go on.”

Here we go, Simon thought. “First... I’m a historian. That’s my strength and area of expertise. The division is, after all, focused on the exploration and analysis of history.”

“So as to further the goals of the Order,” Laetitia put in.

“Quite right. I believe that a return to the roots of the department will benefit the Order tremendously, and here’s why.”

Simon slid his chair back. Striding to one of the walls, he touched a button. The wall slid away to reveal a whiteboard and several colored markers.

“Simon, you’re the only person I know who still uses a whiteboard for a presentation,” lamented Kilkerman.

“Hush, David, or I’ll request a chalkboard and ask you to clap the erasers,” Simon replied. The quip was rewarded by a few chuckles, Kilkerman’s laugh the loudest. Simon wrote *HISTORICAL RESEARCH DIVISION* on the board, stepped back, examined the words, and straightened out the T in *HISTORICAL*.

“Now then. Our greatest tool is the Animus.” He nodded toward Kilkerman as he spoke. The current head of the project raised his marmalade toast in solidarity. “We all know what it does; accesses the genetic memory of the subjects, homes in on specific ancestors, and so forth and so on. It’s my understanding that there’s a shiny new one available to be used, right, David?”

“There is indeed,” Kilkerman said, straightening. “A great leap for-

ward in technology—Model number 4.35. We’ve virtually eliminated such side effects as nausea and headaches. Plus we’ve found ways to make it even more integrative.”

“I’m personally quite excited to hear that, and you’ll see why in just a moment,” Simon said.

He turned back to the board, writing the word *ANIMUS* in bright red. He drew two arrows below it angling toward the right and the left. “Hitherto, we’ve used the Animus primarily to gather one specific type of information—the locations of Pieces of Eden.”

The Templars had a single task—to guide humanity’s development correctly—but many tools with which to do so. The Pieces of Eden were perhaps the most important. They were the relics of a civilization variously known as the Isu, the Precursors, or the First Civilization. They not only predated humanity, but actually created—and, for a time, enslaved—it. Remnants of Precursor technology had the potential to grant users a variety of abilities and power over others. Their value eclipsed ordinary classifications as “historical” or “monetary.” Although the Templar Order could likely boast the largest collection in the world, even it did not possess many of the priceless artifacts, and several of the items in the collection were broken or otherwise unusable.

“Once we learned about the existence of a Piece of Eden,” Simon continued, “from, say a mention in an old manuscript, or about a person associated with one—off we went on the hunt for it.”

Under the left-hand arrow jutting down from the word *ANIMUS* he wrote: *INFORMATION*. Below that, he scribbled *1. Pieces of Eden* and beneath that, a) *Locate*. “That hunt consists of, among other methods, utilizing the vast network of living genetic material at our disposal—otherwise known as the valued customers and loyal employees of Abstergo Industries.” Simon wrote *i. Customers & Employees* beneath a) *Locate*.

“Our secondary branch of research involved learning more of what we could about our old enemies, the Assassins. And we wanted the

same sort of thing as we did with the Pieces of Eden—the ability to sniff them out in present day.”

Simon wrote 2. *Assassins*, and then as he had earlier, the words *a) Locate, i. Customers & Employees*.

“Now, this is all fine, absolutely super. It’s been enormously helpful in increasing both the influence of the Order *and* the bottom line of our company.”

“There’s a ‘but’ in there,” Reider said.

“I hope you’re not suggesting we abandon this line of research?” England’s voice was deceptively mild.

“Not at all,” Simon assured her. “But I think there’s much more the Animus can do for the Order. There’s an aspect of it that we’ve not investigated yet. One that I believe could, over time and if carefully managed, be as advantageous to us in its own way as the acquisition of Pieces of Eden.”

He now wrote on the board, beneath the second arrow, the word *Knowledge*.

“Now, you might be thinking that information *is* knowledge. But data demands context in order to be useful. For instance, say it’s a fact that there is a place where there is earth, stones, wood, and water. When we realize that the water is an ocean, the earth and stones are a rocky shoreline, and the wood is spars from a seafaring vessel, we give that information context. Now what was once merely raw data has become information that leads us to realize that there is a high likelihood of a shipwreck.”

“I’ve got a full schedule, Simon,” Rikkin said. “Get to the point, or there’s a high likelihood your own ship will be scuttled before its maiden voyage.”

Simon’s ears grew hot, but he had to acknowledge the metaphor was apt. “My point is that while computers could decipher all this, and we’ve certainly put technology to good use, we’ve also realized the value of the human touch. I’ll circle back to this in just a moment. Once we start utilizing the Animus not just for data and information,

but for knowledge, with all its lovely subtleties, look what opens up for us.”

He went back to the board and under *Knowledge* wrote *Pieces of Eden*.

“With information, we know *what*—enough to identify the specific artifact—and *where*. But with knowledge, we’ll know *what it does, how it was used, and...*” He wrote the last words in bold letters. “... *how to fix it.*”

His fellow Inner Sanctum members were staring at the whiteboard with expressions that ranged from dubious to enthusiastic to downright hostile. Most, however, at least seemed interested, and he seized upon that.

“And let’s now apply *Knowledge* to the Assassins,” Simon continued. “We won’t just know *who* was an Assassin in a given time period, or *where* to perhaps locate Assassins today. We’ll know *who they were*—what sort of person. We’ll know what matters to them, and to the Assassin Brotherhood, and make note of how that’s changed over the years. We’ll better know how to manipulate them. To break them. And when we start to value *knowledge* rather than just data and information, there’s no telling what we can discover. We don’t know what we don’t know. The potential is staggering.”

He stepped back, regarding what he had written. “We’ll keep these goals as primary ones, of course,” he said, circling the word *INFORMATION* and its attendant comments, “but once we start the ball rolling, we can use the Animus to see interweavings. Patterns. We can rediscover lost theories, ideas, inventions. Wrap up centuries-old mysteries once and for all. Discover what truths really lay behind the old myths and legends and folklore. I posit that all this and more is possible, provided we expand the purpose of the Animus and open our minds.”

“We’re doing this now,” Kilkerman said, his hands folded over his large belly and his eyes no longer twinkling with humor. “Trust me, Simon, we’re paying close attention to what we learn.”

“Yes—and we can do so much more with not much more effort.”

“We did not need this romantic, sentimental approach to virtually

wipe out our enemy over fifteen years ago.” The contempt in Stearns’s voice made the room feel abruptly chilly.

“No, we did not. But they’re getting harder to find. Cleverer, more creative. And we need to be, too, if we’re to stop them.”

“Time is a precious resource,” Berg said pointedly.

“It is,” Simon agreed, “and we must be careful how we allocate it. We presently spend a very great deal of time gallivanting about looking for Pieces of Eden, when we’re already in possession of a few we either don’t understand or are damaged in some manner. We could both narrow our Animus experiences and make them more general. We need to target individuals whom we know to have an abundance of Precursor DNA, and—”

“We are already doing that as well,” Gramática said.

“Through Abstergo Entertainment and Dr. Nakamura’s department, yes,” Simon replied, “people who aren’t Templars, and don’t know exactly what they’re looking for. How much more effective would an Animus hour be if one of us were making use of it? Our DNA is a massive and presently untapped resource.

“One hour of our time could yield solutions to things we haven’t even thought of yet,” said Simon. “And of course, there is also knowledge for knowledge’s sake. It’s impossible to put a price tag on something like that.”

“Spoken like a true historian,” Berg said, and somehow managed to make the word sound unsavory. Despite himself, Simon bristled.

“I’ll prove it to you,” he heard himself saying. Instantly he wished the words back, but they were out there now, floating about like lost balloons. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, he thought, and took a deep breath. “As I said earlier, we all know our lineages. I have an ancestor who fought in Joan of Arc’s army. She is believed to have possessed one of the Swords of Eden... Piece of Eden 25, according to the inventory. I have a theory that it might well be the one that belonged to Jacques de Molay himself.”

“The one in my office,” purred Rikkin. He turned to the rest of the Inner Sanctum. “There’s a lot of its history that’s still unknown.

What we do know is that it once belonged to de Molay, and later fell into the hands of Grand Master François-Thomas Germain, during the French Revolution. The Assassin Arno Dorian took it from Germain upon killing him.”

Simon nodded. “It is my intention to spend time in the Animus myself and confirm that this sword is the same that was once classified as Piece of Eden 25.”

Rikkin leaned on the table, cooling cup of coffee in one hand, chin in the other. “De Molay’s sword was damaged when it was in the possession of Germain. Whatever unique abilities it once displayed, it no longer seems to possess.”

“I repeat—with someone of my knowledge in the chair, I may well be able to determine how to repair it if I can see it in action.”

A small smile quirked Rikkin’s lips. “All right,” he said. “Let’s call this a test run. I’ll let you follow this breadcrumb trail, Hathaway, and find out where it leads. If you can give me concrete results in one week, I’ll greenlight the shift in your department’s direction and allocate the appropriate resources.”

Simon’s heart sank. A *week*? Rikkin’s smile widened, as if he could read the mind of the newest member of the Templar Inner Sanctum.

“Done,” Simon said, and squared his shoulders.

“Excellent.” Rikkin placed his napkin on the table and rose. “You’d best be about it, then.” There might have been more obvious ways to end a meeting, but Simon currently couldn’t think of one. “Oh, and Simon?”

“Yes, sir?”

Rikkin and Kilkerman exchanged glances, as if they were in a secret together. “It’s not really a ‘chair’ anymore,” Rikkin said.

“Beg pardon?” asked Simon.

“You’ll see.”

CHAPTER TWO



It was a familiar room, but now it was his, and Simon found that made a difference.

Carrying an enormous box of books, he paused at the wide threshold to look around. To the left, the astonishing view of the London Eye, Big Ben, and the Palace of Westminster where Parliament sat took up a huge section of the wall. A second large window on the right, closer to Isabelle's—now his—desk, ensured that plenty of light filled the room. Large, comfortable leather chairs provided the option of curling up with a book, and the massive bookcases offered hundreds of titles from which to choose. The heady smell of old paper and leather bindings permeated the room; the intoxicating scent of the past.

Simon walked through the sitting area, his feet making no sound on the thick, rich red carpeting, and placed the box on the large desk. Isabelle had not overly personalized her office, but he noticed that there were some places in the cabinets where objects had obviously been removed. Gramática had a wife and children, but never mentioned

them—nor apparently *saw* them, given the hours he spent at the lab. Rikkin had a daughter, Sofia, but she was an adult and a full Templar in her own right. The cool killer Berg, oddly enough, was the only high-ranking Templar of Simon's acquaintance who had a small child he genuinely seemed to love; a little girl with cystic fibrosis. Simon only knew this because treatment for her had been the main bait with which the Order had tempted Berg to join their ranks.

Simon had no child, no wife, no girlfriend, not even a cat, and he was quite content with that status.

As he trudged back and forth down the hall with his belongings, Simon thought about the deadline Rikkin had set him. Fortunately Simon had done his research before making his presentation. Joan's life was well chronicled and there was a bounty of primary sources—the meat and drink of researchers. Hopefully, it would be enough to enable Simon to make the most use of the single week.

Joan of Arc. Fascinating, that he claimed as an ancestor someone who had traveled with her. He had never experienced the Animus personally, as he had never been a field agent and so had not participated in the Animi Training Program. He was well aware that the authors of precious primary resources were hardly impartial. But he, a historian with, as the saying went, no horse in this race—he would be able to be much more objective.

He fired up the computer and logged in. The Abstergo logo appeared on the large wall screen. "Animus Room," he said aloud. He was standing in front of the desk, unpacking a glass display case containing a rare eleventh-century version of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, when the face of the chief Animus technician appeared. She had long, glossy black hair gathered into a bun in a professional manner, dark brown eyes, and a friendly smile.

"Good morning, Professor Hathaway, I'm Amanda Sekibo. How may I help you?"

"Hello, Ms. Sekibo, we've not properly met yet, but I'm the new—"

"Head of Historical Research, yes, sir," she replied. "Dr. Kilker-

man has told us all about you. We're all looking forward to introducing our new Animus to you. What can I do for you today?"

"I was in a meeting about an hour ago with Mr. Rikkin," he said. "I'm cleared to use the Animus for a rather time-sensitive project. I had assumed you would be notified. I'd like to schedule my first session immediately, if it's quite convenient."

Sekibo's brow furrowed. "Hang on a moment, please... ah, all right, yes, you are indeed already confirmed and cleared for Animus usage, but not until you've met with Dr. Bibeau."

"Who's he when he's at home?"

"*She*, sir, and she's one of our top psychiatrists."

Simon bristled. "I've had multiple evaluations and there's never been a jot of concern. I'm certain I don't need to be wasting the good doctor's time with—"

"I'm sorry, sir, Mr. Rikkin has made it quite clear." Sekibo had the sort of apologetic look people wore when the answer was going to be "no," regardless of anything one said.

Simon knew, of course, about the various dangers of the Animus. It was nothing like the mass-marketed videogames that had won Abstergo Entertainment so many awards and had (not at all incidentally) for several years provided the Templars with an enormous stream of income in addition to information. One needed to be monitored, and he understood that with this new model one couldn't even get settled into it without assistance. Simon removed his specs and pressed his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose for a moment, then sighed and nodded.

"Well, of course I respect Mr. Rikkin's decision. I'll make an appointment with Dr. Bibeau straight away."

The young woman had the grace to look uncomfortable. "Well, sir, she's flying in tonight from the Aerie facility in the States. I expect she'll be ready to see you first thing in the morning."

"Right," Simon said. Of course. "One more thing—just confirming that Mr. Rikkin did, indeed, impress upon you that I have a proj-

ect due in a week?”

“Yes, sir, once you’re cleared, you’re mint to go.”

“Cheers,” Simon said, and ended the call. To himself, he muttered, “*Six* days it is.” He plopped down in the comfortable leather chair where he had seen Isabelle Ardant so many times, located Bibeau’s name in the company directory, and composed an e-mail to her requesting they meet for breakfast at Temp’s at seven-thirty sharp.

Heaven help you if you cost me another minute in the Animus, he thought sourly, and hit “send.”

DAY 2

In the end, it was Simon who was almost late. The lack of sleep during the initiation ritual had caught up with him. Victoria Bibeau was waiting for him when he arrived at seven twenty-six.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but it wasn’t this trim, bright-eyed woman with a pixie haircut and toothy but genuine smile. He wondered how it was she did not look a bit jet-lagged. Her hand-shake was firm, but not crushing.

“A pleasure to meet you, Professor Hathaway,” she said, and there was just a hint of a French accent in her voice.

“I hope you had a pleasant flight.”

“Thank you, I did, it is nice to be in London again. Tea always tastes better to me when I and the cup are surrounded by England.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” he said as they stepped inside. Abstergo had a total of three restaurants on site, ranging from the Snack Shack for quick bites, coffee, and tea, to the elaborate Bella Cibo, where important guests were wined and dined. Tempest in a Teapot, abbreviated to Temp’s more often than not, served only light breakfasts, elevenses, and afternoon tea, and was Simon’s favorite, mainly because he almost always found himself working through lunch and dinner, and Temp’s delivered.

“Good morning, Professor Hathaway,” the waiter greeted them. He bore a tray with a small teapot, two cups, milk, lemon, and honey, and set the items down between them as he spoke. “The usual for you, sir?”

“Always,” Simon replied. “Poole, this is Dr. Victoria Bibeau, from the Aerie in the States. She’ll be staying with us a week.”

Poole’s eyes sparkled. “A pleasure, Doctor. No doubt if you’re working with Professor Hathaway, we’ll be seeing a lot of you here at Temp’s.”

“I’m getting that impression,” Bibeau replied.

“Will you be traveling outside of London? The leaves are turning.”

“Sadly, no, all business here in the city, I’m afraid.”

“Too bad. Make sure you drop in for an afternoon tea—we’ve got pumpkin biscuits and apple spice cake this time of year.”

“I hope we can,” smiled Victoria. “For now, though, I suppose I’ll have the usual, too.”

“Two racks of toast and rashers of bacon,” Poole said, nodded, and headed toward the kitchen. As Bibeau poured milk into her tea, Simon decided to get right to the point.

“So, Dr. Bibeau... why you?”

She took a sip before replying. “I have extensive experience helping to integrate first-time users of the Animus,” she said.

“Yes, I read about your work at Abstergo Entertainment and in the Aerie,” he said. The Aerie was a unique facility currently devoted to training a small, specific group of young adults. They were unique in that their genetic memories were more important—and valuable—together than separately. “I’ve not seen the teenage years for some time, Doctor.”

“Please, call me Victoria,” she said. “And I’m quite aware of that. I had a case at Abstergo Entertainment that... well, it was life-changing in several ways, both good and bad. The bottom line is there are few in the Order who know more about what interaction with the Animus can do to the human brain than I. I don’t know if you’ve spoken with Dr. Kilkerman yet, but the model you’ll be using is a new one—a prototype, really.”

He bristled. "Yes, naturally I have spoken with Dr. Killkerman, and I understand it's an improvement."

"Even so—you're a first timer, you have only a week to do what you need to in order to prove the value of your approach, and you'll be spending a lot of time in it. Quite simply, you need me, Simon."

Poole arrived with their toast and bacon. Simon sipped his tea for a moment, then said, "Clearly, you've read about me and my own work."

"Oh yes," Victoria said. "I will be very interested in learning about your ideas as we work together. And before you say it, I also read all your psychological evaluations and find you remarkably stable. I don't anticipate many problems."

"I don't anticipate *any*."

She showed prominent white front teeth in a genuine smile. "Well, then, *commençons*."

"I don't speak French, I'm afraid."

"You might in two weeks. Well," she amended, "whatever was spoken in the fifteenth century."

"That would be Middle French... pardon?"

"Are you familiar with the Bleeding Effect?"

"Ah... of course." The Bleeding Effect was a possible side effect of spending time in the Animus. On occasion, the personality, thoughts, emotions, and sometimes physical abilities from one's ancestor "bled" into the subject. "I'm already fluent in Russian, Spanish, and Arabic, but I can't imagine where Middle French would come in handy."

"Could be fun at a party," she said, grinning, then added more seriously, "but honestly, it wouldn't be immediate, and I doubt you'll be anywhere near fluent. Sometimes, a Bleeding Effect can be positive. Learning a new skill, like martial arts, or a language. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the potential it has to be extremely dangerous. I'm sure you're familiar with Subjects 4 and 14, and the devastating result the Bleeding effect had on them. But I, unfortunately, had a chance to observe it personally."

Her eyes were somber and her voice quiet as she spoke. "One of our

research analysts at Abstergo Entertainment got far too caught up in his subject. Eventually, he became convinced that he was the reincarnation of an Assassin named Arno Dorian, who was active during the French Revolution.”

“Not the nicest time in history, certainly,” Simon said. “What happened?”

“He attempted to sabotage the project. He destroyed priceless research—deleted files, smashed hard drives, burned his notes. The Order tried to contain him, but he resisted.” Her lips pressed together.

Simon understood what that meant. “Ah, I see. That’s too bad. All that research—just gone. Were you able to recover any of it?”

She gave him an expression he couldn’t fathom. “Some,” she said. “Anyway, it’s my understanding that most of the problems we’ve experienced in the Animus have been virtually eliminated. That’s the goal, at least. Which means that the main concern is the Bleeding Effect. As long as people are people, I do not think we will ever fully conquer that one.”

While they finished their breakfast, Victoria questioned Simon about his hobbies. He demurred at first, saying, “I’m a Templar, we don’t have hobbies,” but she revealed that she herself enjoyed pottery and running marathons. “Not at the same time, though.” She smiled her wide, toothy grin. “They help me get out of my head and into my body for a while. You must have something you enjoy doing.”

Simon admitted that he had a fondness for the ocean. “Sailing?” Victoria asked.

“Diving, actually,” he said. “Shipwrecks.” He paused. “And hidden passageways. There’s loads of them in London.”

She looked at him with new respect. “There’s more to you than meets the eye, Simon Hathaway.”

He thought about it and sighed. “Actually, no, I think I’m about as dull as one would expect.” He steered the direction back to their task, elaborating on what he was trying to accomplish and outlining the sword’s history. “If your analyst was researching Arno Dorian, you

may have even seen the sword we'll be investigating. François-Thomas Germain owned it for a while, till Dorian, ah, dispatched him."

He pulled out his tablet from his briefcase and sent her some of his notes, which included a list of incidents in Joan's life that would be the most productive for them to explore through his ancestor's memories. Victoria said this would be of great help in working up an algorithm, to make the best use of their Animus time.

"How much do you know about this time period?" he inquired, flagging Poole down for another pot of tea.

"Not much, I'm afraid. I was pulled onto this project less than twenty-four hours ago. I find that I don't have to be a good historian to be of help to research analysts, but I think an understanding of the basics would be beneficial."

Simon hid his annoyance. Although he was technically a professor he found teaching frustrating, and wasn't looking forward to walking Victoria through step by step. "Well," he said with false cheer, "let's see if we can get through everything on this fresh pot of tea."

"In 1428, when Joan of Arc stepped onto history's stage, the whole concept of who France's "rightful king" was, as was so often the case, muddled by politics, armies, marriages, and inconvenient deaths. The Hundred Years' War—which actually lasted a hundred and sixteen—had been raging for over ninety of them by this time. King Henry V, made famous by Shakespeare, had died six years previously at age thirty-five, not in glorious battle, but ignominiously felled by dysentery, a disease that was no respecter of the difference between kings and commoners. King Charles VI of France, who had gone down in history both as "the Beloved," which it seemed he had been, and "the Mad," which he most *definitely* had been, had survived his English rival by a mere two months.

"Joan's Dauphin, the future Charles VII, was actually the *fourth* of his father's sons to be named heir to the throne. He never expected to become king, and was wretchedly insecure about it. That wasn't helped by rumors spread by the English and Burgundians—those

were the French who followed Philip of Burgundy and joined with the English—”

“*Oui*,” Victoria interrupted, her eyes twinkling. “I think I do know about Burgundians.”

“Oh, of course, right. Sorry. Back to it. Charles’s mother, Isabeau of Bavaria, was accused of taking lovers—including her husband’s brother, so Charles’s legitimacy was in question.”

“Was she really his mother?”

“We think so. He’s definitely recorded as having the Valois nose.”

The topic turned to Simon’s new approach for the department. While much of what he shared was a recap of his presentation to the Inner Sanctum the previous day, he added something he hadn’t volunteered there.

“Joan of Arc had at least three swords that we knew about,” he said. “So it’s not going to be quite the walk in the park we could wish for.”

“So, you fudged a little to Rikkin?”

“The merest trifle,” he insisted. “I have a hunch which one it might be. I’m still quite keen on seeing what turns up along the way. The sword, for me, is only part of it.”

By the time they’d finished the meal, Simon was resigned to Victoria’s presence throughout this phase. If he had to have a nanny holding his hand while he poked through the past, he supposed that she was a tolerable choice.

The direct lift down to the bowels of the London offices—including the rooms where Simon had been inducted into the Order and given the Inner Sanctum his presentation—could only be accessed by certain floors. This was not one of them. They would have to ride back up to Historical Research, then transition to the lift. They left Temp’s and stood in slightly awkward silence as the numbers lit up, indicating the lift’s arrival. The doors slid open and Simon found himself standing face to face with a petite young woman who had a rebellious cherry-red streak in her otherwise black, shoulder-length tresses.

Her brown eyes widened slightly. “Simon,” she said, “Lovely to see you. It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has,” he said. “Anaya, this is Dr. Victoria Bibeau. She’s here for a couple of weeks to help me muddle through some things up in Historical Research. Victoria, this is Anaya Chodary. She used to be a field agent, but now she’s one of our best White Hats.”

For a moment, Victoria looked puzzled, then understanding dawned. “An ethical hacker,” she said.

“Some people think it’s a contradiction in terms, but I like the name,” Anaya said as she and Victoria shook hands.

“Your contribution cannot be overestimated. I am certain you have spared Abstergo a multitude of disasters.”

“Thank you,” Anaya said, “I try my best. I know Simon’s always in a hurry, so I’ll not keep you two.” Her eyes wandered back to Simon’s. “I’m glad I ran into you. I found your jumper the other day. The blue one you thought you’d lost.”

Simon drew a blank, then remembered. “Oh! Right.”

“Shall I run it ‘round for you?”

“Oh, no, don’t bother. Take it to the Oxfam shop or something. I’ve far more than I’ll ever wear.” He stepped into the lift, nodding to her as the door closed. “Cheers.”

He punched the button and the lift ascended with a gentle whir. Victoria was quiet for a moment, then she asked, “What happened between you two?”

Simon threw her a glance. “If you must know, nothing terribly exciting. Just the usual things. Work, responsibilities, so forth. I don’t have to tell you what being a Templar asks of one.”

“Especially a Master Templar and a member of the Inner Sanctum.”

He was taken aback. “Know all that, do you?”

“It... was deemed a good thing for me to know, yes. And yet, Templars do manage to have spouses and families.”

“I don’t. And I recall from your file that you are not among that happy few.”

He had thought she’d bridle at the remark, but instead she laughed. “Touché, Simon.”

CHAPTER THREE



The Animus was located several stories belowground. Security at Abstergo was always a top priority. Everything from the obvious measure of key cards hung about one's neck to the unseen army of ethical hackers, of which the ferociously intelligent Anaya was a brigadier, ensured that constant vigil was kept on Abstergo's physical and technical security.

The lift opened onto a spacious two-story room. On all four sides were three-dimensional monitors, with white-coated technicians seated in front of them. Out of the corner of his eye, Simon glimpsed myriad scenes of tiny, three-dimensional images of people playing out their inevitable destinies while they were analyzed and cataloged. Elsewhere in the room priceless antiquities were on stately display. Centuries-old relics softened the gray concrete and chrome of the walls; swords, small statues of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman gods, banners, shields, chalices, and horns filled elegant display cases.

But it was the Animus that commanded his attention, and he obeyed, staring at the machine with pale blue eyes gone wide behind his spectacles.

He understood now what Rikkin had meant when he said it wasn't really a "chair" anymore. Gleaming and perfect—as of course it would be—this Animus would not seat its occupants. It would embrace them.

An exquisite amalgamation of technology and unsettling, accidental art, the jointed frame hung suspended from the ceiling, looking like a metallic human skeleton—if human skeletons had been modeled on those of snakes. It had a spine, arms, legs, everything but a head, but Simon suspected a separate helmet served that function. A large metal ring would keep the occupant standing erect, and there were a variety of extremely secure-looking straps to keep said occupant in place.

They had attracted the attention of Amanda Sekibo, who headed over to greet them. "Professor Hathaway, Dr. Bibeau," she said, "welcome to the Animus Room. So, Professor—what do you think of our new model?"

"It looks a bit like something the Inquisition might have used back in the day, doesn't it?"

Victoria stepped in quickly at Sekibo's expression. "It's actually much more sophisticated than the Aerie's Animus. You should have few, if any, headaches, and probably no vomiting at all."

"Lovely," Simon said.

"I'm hoping I'll be able to tell the kids at the Aerie they can have an Animus like this one soon." To Sekibo, she said, "Would you mind familiarizing me with the controls?"

"Of course, Doctor."

"Please, call me Victoria." Simon wondered if she let anybody call her by her last name. He tagged along, tuning them out when they delved into too-technical jargon and listening politely when they went over things he already knew. If he'd been sitting at a desk, his fingers

would have been drumming on it. After what felt like a century, Victoria thanked Sekibo. The young woman went to her team and gently tapped them on the shoulders. They closed down their stations, the miniature avatars disappearing, and quietly entered the lift.

Simon and Victoria were alone. “Are you ready?” Victoria asked.

“For the Iron Maiden over there?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it that,” she said. “I don’t think you appreciate how superior it is to the older models. This one’s the Animus 4.35, derived from the technology Abstergo developed for the 4.3—the one currently in use in Madrid. I understand that while the Madrid one’s more immersive, it’s also supposed to be quite a lot more invasive. For instance, I won’t have to perform a spinal tap on the 4.35.”

“Oh. I see.” He took a deep breath. “Well... as Joan of Arc herself is reputed to have said, better now than tomorrow.”

They walked over to the apparatus. Simon stepped onto the two-part platform, shrugging into a harness that looked too light to be as durable as it was while Victoria fastened the large metal ring about his narrow waist. Gingerly, he put his weight on one foot, then the other. The platforms responded smoothly, like an advanced stair climber or elliptical machine.

“There’s the potential for piece of brilliant exercise equipment here, you know,” he deadpanned.

She laughed. “You don’t know the half of it,” she said. I should put a Bodyband on you to keep track of your steps.” She continued fastening straps and clicking things into place as she spoke. “You’ll have complete freedom of movement. In fact, the harness and the exoskeleton will support your body as it moves the same way your ancestor did. Remember, this won’t be a minute-to-minute encapsulation of your ancestor’s life. The time period is three to four years, but we only have one week.”

We. Her casual insertion of herself into the project vexed Simon, but he brushed it aside. She would be supervising him the entire time, and likely debriefing him. He’d known he would require an assistant,

but she was shaping up to be a partner.

Simon knew he did not play well with others, but there was no getting around it. Victoria double-checked all the fastenings and nodded in approval, and Simon realized just how vulnerable he was. Maybe he would be glad of a partner after all.

“Erm,” he said, tugging slightly on one of the restraints, “What’s the backup if you suddenly have a massive heart attack at your station?”

She laughed, a bright, free sound, and he smiled a little. “An alarm would sound, the doors would unlock, and the medical team would be here in seconds. Eventually someone would get around to letting you out.”

“Brilliant.”

“Abstergo is adamant that a subject must always be monitored. Now, if you’d be willing to risk severe injury, you might be able to leave the last back strap undone and get in by yourself.” Her toothy smile dimmed. “I do not recommend it. One of the kids I work with uses the Animus to escape his own genuine paralysis.”

“Oh. Quite. Well—are we all set?”

“All but the helmet,” Victoria replied. “I’ll place it on, and then we’ll be able to communicate through it.” She stepped behind him and lowered it over his blond head. The thing was almost like a sensory deprivation chamber, utterly black and sound-canceling. It was a peculiar sensation, and Simon actually started when he heard Victoria’s voice in his ear. It was almost as if it was coming from inside his head.

Comfy? He moved experimentally, and was surprised to find that the answer was yes, and said so.

At the moment, it should be completely dark, Victoria continued. The first thing you will see is the Memory Corridor. It’s designed to ease you into the simulation. We can converse easily here, but communication will be harder when the simulation becomes active. We’ll always start with the Memory Corridor, but the first time is particularly important.

Don't worry. This ought to be an easy transition as compared to previous models.

The darkness seemed to be gradually retreating, turning from inky black to the soft, dove-gray of fog. Simon was reminded of a trip to the Scottish Highlands a few years back, when he'd been hiking up Ben Nevis and the fog had rolled in with startling speed. It was almost as if a cloud had decided to plunk itself down. The metaphor became suddenly more apt as Simon's eyes were dazzled by crackles of what seemed to be lightning. The fog/cloud pulsed and roiled slowly, and as Simon watched, fascinated, it reshaped itself here and there, as if it were trying to mold itself into a building, or a tree trunk, or, perhaps, Ben Nevis.

He reached out without thinking, and looked down at his hand. Simon had long, thin fingers, and did little in the way with them other than type or page through old tomes. Occasionally, they were ink-stained. But the hands he now regarded were strong, callused, sporting small scars and torn fingernails. They were darkly tanned, too; his own were milk-pale. Simon looked down at himself, seeing a beige woolen tunic that was oft-mended and more oft-stained. Blue hose covered what he could see of his legs, and on his feet Simon wore simple leather boots. A hood with a short cape covered his head.

He felt his lips curving in a stupid grin as he rubbed the rough fabric of the cape between his right thumb and forefinger, his left hand reaching up to touch his face and discovering there a youth's first downy wisps of beard.

"Bonjour, Gabriel Laxart," he said.

That's a strong resemblance, Victoria's voice said. *If I saw the two of you in a room together, I'd know you were family.*

"Is that unusual?"

No, but often people are shocked at how much they don't look like an ancestor, she replied. *I put you at seventeen or so. You help your father, Durand Laxart, with—*

"Farming, yes, I know," he said. "What's the date?"

Thursday, May Day, 1428. I thought we would start at the beginning. Go ahead and move around while the simulation finishes loading.

It was an odd sensation, wearing a body like a set of clothing. The boy was slender—all right, Simon was slender, Gabriel was skinny—but wiry, and moved easily. A threshing motion came naturally, but when Simon tried to use his wooden walking staff as a pike or a sword, he dropped it.

Clearly not a Templar yet, Victoria commented drily. Now, this is very important to remember. You are just along for the ride. Don't resist the memories—you can't change them. Don't try to force Gabriel to do something or say something he wouldn't, or you'll desynchronize. And that is very unpleasant.

“What, this Jaguar of an Animus hasn't got that all sorted yet?”

This isn't a time machine, Simon. You can't change the past, and if you try, the Animus lets you know in no uncertain terms. In a way, it's a violent action, with an equally violent repercussion. You told me Gabriel was illegitimate, and he's only recently come to live with his biological father. That's going to work in your favor. He's unfamiliar to almost everyone, so few will notice if you're acting out of character.

Simon nodded acknowledgement. The stigma attached to bastards was, historically speaking, a fairly recent development, so it wasn't surprising the Laxarts, a farming family, had taken in an able-bodied young man. Gabriel's parentage also explained why nothing in Simon's research had turned up any mention of him. Unless they were remarkable in a significant way, illegitimate children were seldom recorded. Family trees didn't like random branches.

While Victoria had been speaking, the roiling mists had become more substantial, clearer, their flat gray flushing to green and blue. Simon found himself facing emerald fields dotted with cattle and sheep. Behind him was a rough road and cottages that indicated he was on the outskirts of a small village.

Domrémy. Joan's birthplace. The only sounds were those of wind in the trees, birds, and the lowing of cattle. The quiet was unnerv-

ing. No cars or planes, or air conditioners, or computers, or mobile phones. For some reason, he hadn't expected that.

He stood for a moment, simply getting used to the idea that he was reliving the memories of a long-dead young man. So real; from the slight breeze brushing his face, to the smells, to the feel of the earth beneath his feet. *If Abstergo Entertainment's games provide even a fraction of this*, Simon thought, *it's no wonder they've won so many awards*.

Simon looked down at Gabriel's hands, and realized he was holding bread and cheese wrapped up in a cloth bundle. Victoria had said it was May 1... a feast day. Ah... now he had it figured out. He'd learned through his research that a long-standing tradition in Domrémy saw the town's young people visiting the nearby spring on certain feast days. They would, essentially, enjoy a picnic near what they called the Ladies' Tree, or the Fairy Tree. This rather charming custom was called "doing the fountains," and it was clear to him now that Gabriel was on his way to join in.

He began to walk, letting Gabriel find the way. The boy was tall and gangly, as Simon himself had been in his youth; he understood the motion of long legs, and Gabriel was someone accustomed to walking.

The breeze brought the sound of happy laughter, voices (some terribly off-key) raised in song, and the bright noises of small pipes. A large tree was silhouetted against the blue sky, and there was movement under its branches. Simon was no botanist. He wasn't even particularly fond of nature. But the tree was glorious. White petals dotted the green-leafed boughs. The simple color was offset with the pinks, reds, and blues of other flowers, all woven into garlands and draped over the large, lower branches.

Girls of various ages sat in a small cluster, their heads bowed together as they laughed and played with the flowers. Another group had formed a small circle, engaged in a dance that bordered on a dizzying run about the tree's thick trunk. The boys either climbed the tree or sprawled on the grass, tearing off hunks of coarse brown

bread. The older ones offered some bread to the girls; the younger ones tossed small pieces at them instead.

I don't belong here, came a thought, and Simon wasn't sure if it was his or Gabriel's.

For a moment, Gabriel's long legs were rooted to the spot. One of the older youths dropped lithely from the branches and strode toward him. He had dark hair, a swarthy complexion, and an open, friendly smile.

"You must be our cousin Gabriel!" he said cheerfully. "I'm Pierre. That lout over there is my brother Jean." The lout under discussion was busily polishing off the last of the bread and brushing crumbs off his shirt. He was older and larger than Pierre, solid where the younger brother was quick and lithe.

"Hello, Pierre," Gabriel said. "Y-your mama sent me with this."

"Ha!" Pierre said. "Hey, Jean, you don't have to stop eating after all." Jean looked up at the sound of his name and got to his feet, ambling toward them.

Even as Gabriel spoke with his cousins, Simon was wondering where Joan was. "I hear your father saves the town when brigands come," Gabriel was saying. Jacques d'Arc was the town's doyen, a position that collected taxes and organized Domrémy's defenses.

"Burgundians, you mean," Pierre said darkly.

"It's the same thing," Jean said. He tore off a piece of bread and handed the loaf back to Gabriel. The bread was coarse but delicious, and the cheese was creamy and rich and gamy. "Living in Burey-en-Vaux, you're close to Vaucouleurs, so you have the king's soldiers to protect you."

"They're supposed to protect you, too," Gabriel said, but Pierre simply shrugged. Clearly, this was an uncomfortable subject in Domrémy. "So," he said, trying again, "do you fight the brigands yourselves?" Gabriel had never seen a raid, and it sounded terribly exciting.

"Oh, no. We get out of their way. Papa has rented an old fortress on an island in the river where we can all go with our animals, and as

much as we can take with us. Sometimes we go to Neufchâteau, if the attack blocks our way to the island,” Pierre’s pleasant face hardened. “Our house is made of stone, but most aren’t so lucky.”

Gabriel sobered at the words. “Has... has anyone been killed?”

“Not recently. We generally get enough warning that everyone and their animals can get to shelter.”

Pierre kicked his brother, who responded with a yelp muffled by a mouthful of cheese. “Gabriel, go give some to Jeannette before this pig eats it all. She’s been dancing all day, when she hasn’t been wandering off to go stare at the river as if it’s talking to her. I’m sure she’s hungry.”

“Which one is she?” Excitement fluttered in Simon’s chest.

“The lively one there, in the red,” Pierre said, pointing. Joan was indeed the “lively one,” moving with high energy, her body strong and lithe as she moved. Long, slightly wild black hair dotted with flowers fell the length of her straight back.

I am the luckiest historian who has ever lived, thought Simon, almost giddy as Gabriel strode on long, coltish legs toward Joan of Arc.

“Jeanette?” Gabriel said. His hands were shaking as they clutched the offering of bread and cheese.

Joan of Arc, La Pucelle, the Maid of Orléans, future patron saint of France, turned around.

Her eyes were large and fierce and blue and steady, and they seemed to slice through Gabriel as if piercing through body and bone to his very soul. He couldn’t breathe, could only stare back, blood suddenly galloping through his veins to rush into his face and—

The world folded in on itself like a crumpled piece of paper, all its images and color and solidity retreating at a breakneck pace, bearing away that ineffable, transcendent face with them.

Simon Hathaway was left only with blackness and his own scream.

ABOUT CHRISTIE GOLDEN

Award-winning and eight-time *New York Times* bestselling author Christie Golden has written fifty novels and several short stories in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. She has earned wide critical acclaim and a devoted fan base for both her original work and her authentic and skillful literary treatment of many beloved film, television, and gaming franchises.

Golden has written more than a dozen Star Trek novels, and about the same number of World of Warcraft and StarCraft novels. She has written three books in the Star Wars series Fate of the Jedi, which she co-wrote with Troy Denning and the late and greatly missed Aaron Allston, as well as *Star Wars: Dark Disciple*, the novelization of the unaired episodes of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, cited as one of the best of the new canon novels.

Golden has been an aficionado of the Assassin's Creed universe since 2014, and has already written two books for the franchise: *Blackbeard: The Lost Journal*, a companion book to the video game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*; and *Assassin's Creed Unity: The Abstergo Employee Handbook*. *Assassin's Creed: Heresy* is the newest addition to this list.

Christie Golden has been publishing books for twenty-five years. The TSR Ravenloft line in 1991 was launched with her first novel, the bestselling *Vampire of the Mists*, which introduced elven vampire Jander Sunstar. To the best of her knowledge, she is the creator of the elven vampire archetype in fantasy fiction. Among her original fantasy novels are *On Fire's Wings*, *In Stone's Clasp*, and *Under Sea's Shadow*, the first three in her multi-book fantasy series The Final Dance. Her very first original novels, *Instrument of Fate* and *In Stone's Clasp*, are currently available in digital form nearly fifteen years after their original publication.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Christie Golden currently lives in Virginia. You can find her online at christiegolden.com, on Facebook as Christie Golden, and on Twitter @ChristieGolden.



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CA 94107, U.S.A.

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Published by Ubisoft.

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Special thanks :

Yves Guillemot, Laurent Detoc, Alain Core, Geoffroy Sardin, Yannis Mallat, Etienne Allonier, Aymar Azaïzia, Antoine Czeszynski, Anouk Bachman, Maxime Durand, Richard Farrese, Arin Murphy-Hiscock, Jose Holder, Raphaël Lacoste, Yves Lançon, Misha Benjamin, Virginie Gringarten, Marc Muraccini, Cécile Russeil, Faceout Studio, Bryan Longoria, Jeff Miller, Paul Nielsen, Torrey Sharp, Michael Beadle, Heather Pond, Joanie Simms, Megan Beatie, Andrien Gbinigie, Stephanie Pecaoco, Sain Sain Thao, Michael Kwan, Clémence Deleuze, François Tallec.

ISBN 978-1-945210-02-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

First printing 2016. Printed in the U.S.A.

Book design by Faceout Studio, Jeff Miller and Paul Nielsen