

Game Change

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Game Change

by [HakSem](#)

Summary

'The Gathering' is over, now Connor has to go forward.
But he is not the last Immortal, he did not get 'The Prize' and an old acquaintance is in town.

Notes

I have made a major overhaul, put the whole story through Grammarly.
Hopefully, it will be easier to read now. No changes in the story, but I did change the chapter division, so there are now a few more chapters.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The End

~ 1986 ~

Connor draws a deep breath and opens his eyes. Still in the destroyed factory building... Disappointed he closes them again.

It had felt like a lifetime, so real, so soft. But it was just a dream, a vivid tangible colorful wonderful dream. But still, just a dream.

He feels no different than after any other Quickening. Well maybe a little rawer, more worn-out, Kurgan was old and powerful, after all.

With no energy to do anything, he lies there waiting for the Quickening to settle.

Ramirez is avenged.

The urging of the Gathering seems to have dissolved, almost in peace, but not quite. Absently he catalogs the feeling as vaguely familiar. Far too tired to remember from when and where.

Brenda... That beautiful stubborn lovely strong woman. The dream, a lifetime with her, and with children. Not real, maybe not even her, just a fantasy. ^The Dream^.

The last of the Quickening reenergizes him, sweeping the pain and most of the fatigue away. Another deep breath, only one way to find out. He reopens his eyes, searching for her as he starts to get up.

"Connor! Are you okay?" Brenda is by his side as soon as he starts to move.

Strong, yes. Unafraid, important in a less peaceful life. He grunts and lifts his hand to her face, a shadow of a smile and a warm glow in the eyes. *"Will be. We better get out of here, the light show will have drawn attention."*

Coming outside they hear sirens closing. Connor pulls them into a shadowed doorway. A firetruck passes, followed by a police car. He carefully leans in to kiss her, in no hurry to move on now that they are out of the building. They are still in the doorway kissing when another police car followed by an ambulance arrives.

Then they walk home to Brenda, not speaking. Well inside the door they quickly get undressed and move to the bedroom, as if they had known each other for a lifetime.

In the morning they talk over breakfast, before trying out the living room carpet and the couch, then talk some more over lunch.

Decisions are made. Connor calls Rachel, and they make an appointment for dinner.

"I believe we are going to need a shower before we go anywhere." There is a joyful sparkle in Connor's eyes when he carries a laughing Brenda to the bathroom.

Later they walk, hand in hand, to the antique shop. They are laughing and talking as they turn around the last corner and Connor feels a slight brush of another Immortal.

Chills down his spine when he sees a male figure in a long coat step out of his shop. Instinctively he reaches for the katana and freezes as he realizes it is not there. The stomach quenches and he remembers: He never picked it up after the Quickening. Ramirez sword...

To his great relief, the man walks the other way and disappears around the next corner, and the Presence with him.

Connor runs the last part of the way, Brenda is following him confused. He throws up the door and stops when Rachel turns to look at him surprised. *"Are you okay? Did he hurt you? What did he want!"* Connor demands in a harsh voice.

"I'm fine! Come in and close the door. He left your sword and a note." Rachel answers, when Brenda has closed the door after them. *"It was a polite, young-looking, man. He didn't threaten me in any way. Just asked: "Please, give this to Connor." Then he left.*

Now let me close, the lasagna's in the oven." She picks up the sword and a note, handing them to Connor. Then she pushes him through the backdoor towards the apartment part of the store, with a smile and wink at Brenda.

Connor accepts the note and katana, reading it as he steps into the elevator, Brenda next to him.

The note is machine written:

Figured you might want the sword back, not good to leave it for the police anyway.

You have people shadowing you.

If you lose them you will find me at the Trinity Church Cemetery tomorrow after sunset.

There is no signature.

They sit down to eat and Connor fills Rachel in on the whole Game not over and no Prize situation. Also that he and Brenda have decided to move, going back to Scotland.

Rachel tells them that the young man, who introduced himself as Ben, had insisted that the note was only to be given to Connor. And that if he did not show, she should burn it.

Connor reads it again as they sit by the fireplace sipping drinks.

"If he wanted to Challenge me he wouldn't have chosen holy ground to meet. He's naturally nervous about the mortals following me."

I owe him for returning the sword. I'll spend the afternoon tomorrow losing any tails and meet him." He states it as a fact but turns to Brenda for approval.

She's not happy but nods.

Connor throws the note in the fire and they spend the rest of the evening planning their move. When Rachel excuses herself they move on to Connor's bedroom.

~ 1986 ~

The next morning Brenda wakes up to the sight of Connor doing katas nude.

After a late breakfast, she goes home to start packing and arranging for their move.

Connor leaves the shop at midday. He spends the rest of the day moving through crowds, and doing unexpected things. He lost the police officers after less than 20min.

But as he takes a late lunch in a shopping mall he spots someone else. When he moves again, he has to admit they are good, and that he would not have spotted them had he not been warned.

By sundown, he is almost certain he has lost them. Connor arrives at the cemetery an hour late, hoping that whoever the Immortal is, he will still be there. He enters the unlocked gate and feels the Presence almost right away.

It stays at the edge of his range, leading him to a part that has lots of big gravestones to hide behind.

A man is waiting in the shadows. Wearing a full-length dark gray wool coat, not the knee-long light trench coat Connor prefers. He also has a knitted hat and gloved hands carefully held visible.

Connor moves his own hands a little out from his body, moving a little closer. He stays at a respectful distance, not wanting to crowd the unknown Immortal.

"Thank you, I appreciate having my sword back." Connor nods respectfully.

"I have to admit I was tempted to keep it." The man steps out of the shadows with a smirk on his face.

"It would have been a nice trophy don't you agree?" He holds out his hands with a big grin.

~ Flashback: 1646 Japan Mount Niri ~

Down The Mountain

~ Flashback: 1646 Japan Mount Niri ~

Connor is hanging herbs on a drying rack next to a cave opening. Working in silence next to Nakano.

A young boy comes running and almost falls over himself trying to stop, starting to talk before he has stopped. Words tumbling out in local dialect, still breath taken from the running.

Connor understands some words, maybe one in five: Surprise, Chinese noble, a white man, bathhouse, honor, guards, name of a local Temple, town guards, battle or fight, cowardly behavior, bathhouse or possibly whorehouse, acquire something, holy or sacred possibly cursed token, pearls, bathhouse again or maybe whorehouse again, the white man, priests, the Daimyo, honor. And plenty of he's and she's.

Finally, the boy is totally out of breath and just stands there panting in front of Nakano.

"The Honorable Chinese noble turned out to be a white man? Did he give a name?" Nakano asks.

Maybe he did not understand more of the boy's frantic babble than Connor had.

The boy shakes his head, this time he speaks slower and bows to Nakano repeatedly. *"Forgive me, Honored Elder, the white man is a servant of the Honorable Chinese Noble. The white man is called Mao Zhu, Honored Elder."*

"Young Man, do you have something for me from the Honorable Chinese Noble, the Honored Priests, or Master Mao?" He patiently asks the still hard breathing boy.

Ge boy frantically starts to drag forth the bag he has on his shoulder.

"Hush such, careful, take it slow. We don't want to damage anything do we?" Nakano smiles at the poor boy and takes the whole bag from him, opening it on the table used for herbs.

The bag reveals five rolls of scrolls, one empty glass bottle, with a cork hanging on a leader cord. A couple of iron ingots and a heavily decorated oval bronze disc, the size of a man's hand.

Nakano catches his breath as he sees the bronze disc, carefully picking it up to study it closer before he puts it down on the table with great respect.

He looks at the scrolls and picks up one that has signs Connor has never seen the likes of before.

When he opens it there is a drawing of a sword, not a Japanese sword more like a European long sword. More of the unknown signs on the scroll, many of them, Nakano reads it carefully.

"Student Connor, I will have to read and study these carefully before I have a reply for the Honorable Chinese Prince."

"Perhaps this is a good time for a break and some tea, the Young Man may wish for some water as well."

Connor bows to Nakano, before he tells the tired sweaty boy. *"This way, Young Man."*

~ 1646 ~

Later in the afternoon, Connor is hanging herbs again, this time with the boy as company.

Nakano emerges from the far back of his cave. *"Ah, good! You have gotten far while I have been scribing, well done Young Man."*

He smiles at the boy. *"I have made a reply for the Honorable Chinese Prince, there is also a reply for the Honorable First Consort of the Chinese Prince. Both are to be given to the Honorable Chinese Prince."*

He gives the boy a stern look. *"Not to anyone else. Do you understand?"*

The boy looks terrified but bows. *"Yes! Honored Ancient, to the Honorable Chinese Prince himself, not someone else, I understand."* More bowing.

"Good. You may hand the reply for the Temple at the gateway. After. You have delivered to the Honorable Chinese Prince." He hands the bag to the boy, who bows and runs off.

Nakano watches the boy leave.

Then turns to Connor with an amused sparkle in his eyes. *"It would be terribly rude of me to visit, or even invite, the white servant of a Chinese Prince before the Prince has introduced us."*

"Not to speak of unpolitical, with the current view of foreigners. However, you could carry a message to him for me. If you would kindly do this for me?"

"Certainly, Honored Teacher, it would be my pleasure." Connor bows politely.

Nakano laughs. *"Maybe. Student Connor, maybe."*

You will find him in the House of Pleasurable Warmth, at the west side of the river, it is Sacred Ground. Do not challenge him.

He is after all your elder and a good friend of your First Teacher."

Highly amused he gives Connor another bag. *"The bottle and the large scroll are for the man who is called Mao Zhu.*

I will not expect you back until I send for you. Please, try to stay out of politics, be polite and refer any questions to me. Remember, white men are not generally welcome there. Student Connor. The smaller scroll is your permission to be in this province, do not lose it and there is money in the bag.

Enjoy yourself." Nakano smiles.

~ 1646 ~

Before dawn the next morning Connor packs his bag, including some breakfast and a meal for the day. At first light he sets out for the town, it is not the first time he has walked down the mountain to the town, he is known but not liked.

It was hard the first times, to bow and not make enemies. The warrior in him demanding a respect not granted to foreigners here.

Nakano has, with great patients and care, explained what is expected from him and also how the current view of honor will affect other's behaviors.

The whole concept is foreign, yet it is not. The ideal that honor is more important than life, nothing new there. Just the intricacies and rituals around it.

Here he has learned a lot about the courage of a non-warrior.

To bow and look down when a man holds a deadly weapon at you, the most frightening thing he can remember doing. Still, it is the everyday life of the farmers and craftsmen.

Here he has also learned that what one man's honor requires, may be dishonorable to another.

That concepts and rules differ and also, after long talks with Nakano, he has seen that it is not so only between places, but also in time.

He himself has been Immortal for one century.

But Nakano, who is close to two millennia, has a different perspective. He can sometimes point out an ideal or code of conduct, then tell in great detail why, when, where, and how it has developed and changed over time.

Connor came here for the sword-smith and sword-master, he found a mystic and wise man.

In the two years Connor has been here, his world views have been challenged and refined in ways he could not have imagined before.

As he walks on the slim steep trail down the mountain the words of Nakano echo in his mind, for that man does not speak without thought.

"It would be terribly rude of me to visit, or even invite, the white servant of a Chinese Prince before the Prince has introduced us.

Not to speak of unpolitical with the current view of foreigners."

Nakano would go to visit this man, he perceives the man as higher status than himself. Their respective statuses in the mortal world prevent this, it is accepted and therefore, in his view, expected of him to abide with this.

"Maybe. Student Connor, maybe."

Someone Connor may or may not like, but there was more amusement than anything else in Nakano's eyes.

"You will find him in the House of Pleasurable Warmth at the west side of the river, it is Sacred Ground."

The west side of the river is lower class. House of Pleasurable Warmth... Sounds like a whorehouse, still it is on Holy ground. Wonder how that came to be. Connor muses to himself.

A good place for an Immortal to stay.

"Do not challenge him. He is after all your elder and a good friend of your First Teacher."

The warning, yes it was a warning Connor decides, not to challenge him. Before he got the information that the Immortal is older than Connor and a friend of Ramirez.

Nakano's social status in the mortal world would put him high above a servant of a visiting noble, meaning he is placing Mao Zhu higher in the Immortal hierarchy. Nakano, having very little interest in The Game, would only place an Immortal older than himself higher...

~ 1646 ~

It is late afternoon before the town comes into view.

As Connor nears the town gate he is stopped, it is not just the ordinary town guards it is the Daimyo's own warriors. Bowing deeply he produce the scroll with his permit.

"Why are you in town without your master, filthy rat?" The warrior demands.

Connor bites down hard on his pride, the usual town guards have never been overly polite but neither have they been directly impolite. He curses himself for not reflecting on the other warning he got before leaving the cave.

Feeling naked without a weapon he forces himself to bow again. *"Honored Warrior, I was sent by Honored Ancient Master-smith of the Mountain.*

I was told to go to the House of Pleasurable Warmth, at the west side of the river, and not to disturb my Master for some days." A third bow, this like the one he would give Nakano if given an order.

The Guards at the gate laugh hard at this. The warriors, not being local, look somewhat taken aback at this reaction.

The guard captain quickly gathers himself and bows to the warriors. *"Honored Warriors. The House of Pleasurable Warmth, at the west side of the river, is where any master would send a healthy apprentice who has problems concentrating. With a generous amount of money if the master wants peace for more than the one day he has alone."*

At this point, the warriors are also amused. Connor tries, successfully, not to blush.

"The filthy hound was sent to a whorehouse to get cleaned! How fitting!" They laugh hard.

"You! Make sure he gets there without any detours, we don't want more of these dogs wandering." The lead warrior points at one of the town guards, who naturally bows and takes the lead.

Connor follows, glad that he will not need to ask for directions in the crowded town.

They walk by the river on the eastern side passing one wooden bridge and one rope bridge until they get to the only stone bridge, there on the eastern side a two-man high stonewall going all the way to the water.

On the western side an almost as high green bush hedge, as they walk over the bridge Connor see several large houses inside the hedged area and close to the bridge a large ornamented wooden gate.

At the gate, the guard takes his leave and Connor enters. As soon as he steps inside he can feel that it truly is Holy ground.

An elderly woman in beautiful silk clothes approaches him right away.

Connor has not yet learned to read the meaning of clothes in the Japanese culture, being fully aware of this flaw, decides to err on the side of politeness.

"Gracious Lady, Master Nakano sent me here with a scroll for the servant of the Honorable Chinese Prince, his name is Mao Zhu. To whom may I speak to arrange a meeting?" A respectful bow, she is white-haired after all.

She laughs and bows gracefully. *"The second white man in the same day. As polite and kind to an old woman as the first. The young warriors of the Daimyo have only demands and rudeness to offer. Are all white men this polite I wonder."*

She is even older than Connor had thought at first. Yet she moves with the grace of someone half her age.

"You are the apprentice of Nakano yes?" She is direct in a way that Connor finds he has missed, he still bows before answering.

"Yes, Gracious Lady, Master Nakano asked me to do this errand for him before enjoying the pleasures of the house. An honor I have not had before."

A pearly laugh as the old woman smiles. *"Oh, then I must introduce myself. I'm the Elder Priestess of the temple of Joy."*

"We welcome you to our holy springs of warmth, our rooms of joy and pleasure. We turn none away as long as they bring gifts for the Temple." She gestures at a young beautiful woman. *"Bring him to Master Cat. He may choose to stay there or find other joys after, make sure he's taken care of."*

Connor bows and follows the woman.

He is thinking. Temple of joy, well at least the customers find joy don't they. It is indisputably Holy Ground. Maybe a people who find it so difficult to laugh friendly in larger companies need a Temple of Joy.

They walk over a small stone courtyard with a tree in the center, they pass through one house and emerge on a far larger courtyard.

There seem to be many different houses, the closer to the river they are, the larger, more ornate, and gilded. The very young woman goes directly to one of the houses next to the river.

As they come closer and Connor sees more than the one side of the house. He estimates that the one they are going for is larger than most townhouses.

As they get there she hesitates and turns to Connor with several nervous bows. *"Honored Guest. If I may leave you here for a brief moment? I wish to announce you, Honored Sir."*

Connor nods at her, she bows again and enters the house.

Only a few moments later she reemerges. *"Honored Guest, I thank you for your patience, the Honored Guest of the house will be told immediately, Honored Sir."*

Connor looks closer at the nervous young woman. She is very beautiful but seems very young to him. Hardly a woman at all in his eyes, yet she moves with an adult sensuality, maybe the petite woman is older than she looks.

The wall on the house slides to the side. Another young woman kneeling in the opening, with a graceful hand-move she invites them in. *"Mao Zhu claims to be most curious, he wishes to meet the golden-haired man. This way if you please Honored Guest."*

She bows her head to the floor before she stands to show the way with the same grace as the invitation.

Connor has stepped up to the opening and started to take off his shoes before the young woman accompanying him yelps in distress and throws herself at his feet, to do it for him. He lets her.

The other young woman waits without a word, she is at least as beautiful, not quite as young.

"Honored Mao Zhu is in one of the heated rooms, Honored Sir, you may be more comfortable if you change first." She says when the shoes are removed and they enter a short hallway.

'His' young woman is trailing behind them with downcast eyes.

Connor decides to take the advice and nods an affirmative at his guide. She slides a section of the wall to the side and reveals a small space with a wooden bench. On the bench lies folded silk, some kind of clothing Connor assumes and enters.

As the opening slides closed after him, the younger woman moves forward to undress him. Connor removes the bag himself but lets her take the rest.

The silk turns out to be a thin robe and Connor is not sure about having a first meeting with an unknown man, an Immortal, dressed in only a thin silk robe surrounded by attractive women.

But it is too late to change his mind now. He picks up the bag again and takes a breath for relaxation and courage. Reminding himself this is Holy Ground.

At his nod, she slides open the wall on the opposite side of where he entered.

~ 1646 ~

The Other Immortal

~ 1646 ~

The feel of another Immortal meets him simultaneously with a warm herb-filled humid air.

He steps into a large room with a stove in the middle. To the right, there are three stone benches, on the center-most lies a man.

Pale skin, even paler than Connor's. The lithe body is completely naked and glistening with oil, and shaved forehead with a long black braid down the back.

He is attended by a woman, equally naked, carefully filing his nails. And a man, massaging his legs, no more clothed than the others.

None of them even looked up when Connor entered the room, he remains standing, at a loss of what to do now.

"Honored Guest Mao Zhu, I present Honored Guest Apprentice of the Ancient on the Mountain." His young woman announces him.

The guide is kneeling in the corner, she translates to what Connor assumes to be Chinese. She has changed into a similar robe to the one Connor has.

The man on the stone bench looks up and half turns to them, without moving the hand that the woman is working on.

He has a distinct angular face with a large nose, the apparent age somewhere in between 20 and 40, and most certainly a European. The face shows thin lines of laughter and the eyes are green with traces of gold and brown.

He says something in Chinese, and gestures at the bench next to him.

"I am Mao, please join me." The guide translates.

"I am Connor MacLeod, thank you for your invitation. I have brought some things meant for you." Again, the guide translates. Connor wonders if they have any languages in common.

Mao glances at the woman holding his hand, she quickly lets it go. He rises smoothly, surprising the man massaging his legs. Without a shred of self-consciousness, he walks over to Connor.

Connor can think of nothing else to do than bow and hand over the glass bottle.

Mao's eyes are a glowing green with golden specks as he examines the bottle. The body is tense as if he is expecting the bottle to explode, or attack him.

He says something in Chinese and the man quickly disappears, only to be back with a towel that Mao takes from his hands. He carefully wraps the bottle with the towel. Walking over to the wall, he carefully places it in the corner.

Connor brings up the larger scroll for the man as he turns back. Mao receives it with an absent bow and opens it immediately.

He walks the room from side to side in a cat-like way, smooth slow, and lazily. Appearing completely unaware of his surroundings, he snorts at one point while reading.

Then roll it back and hands it to the male, speaking Chinese. The man bows and takes it out of the room.

Mao turns to Connor with a lazy smile and speaks in Chinese. *"As you can hear my Japanese is not very good, is Latin a good language for you?"* The woman translates.

"Latin!? Who but a priest speaks that?" Connor says, in his native Gaelic, before he catches himself and bows. *"My language skills are limited to Gaelic, English, an Arabic dialect, and some French, not counting Japanese, that is."*

Mao laughs at this. *"Who but a priest indeed! I'm however surprised that Ramirez would let you out on your own, without teaching you at least Spanish and Latin."* He says in a slightly odd Gaelic dialect.

Connor realizes this man might not know that Ramirez is dead, Nakano had not known this when he came here. By speaking Gaelic the newly learned manners leave him.

He answers in the short, straight, way of his people. *"He was killed before we parted ways."*

Mao stiffens a short second, grief flashes in his eyes, then it is all gone. There stands a young man smiling. *"Well, what kind of host am I!?"*

Please join me, I was relaxing after the long journey here.

I'm sure you would enjoy a massage as well, there are so many beautiful women or men, whichever you prefer, here." Mao laughs and cups his hand under the chin of the man who was massaging his legs, lifting the face into a light kiss.

Connor is shocked and embarrassed by the obvious... interest, both men show. To humiliate a defeated enemy, or use a slave when no woman is available, is one thing. This is another. This time he completely fails to control his blushing.

Mao laughs. *"Well, I believe we established that you're not a priest. Is your preference for women then? Or is it that you've not experienced anything else?"*

Or anything at all? This age the Christians are so repressive of the joys of life." He lets go of the man and speaks to him in Chinese, the man bows and leaves the room.

"Robe." This in Japanese, to the woman still sitting by the stone bench.

He turns back to Connor and bows politely, showing with an open hand at the low table with sitting mats on the left side of the stove.

"I'd be pleased if you could join me for a small meal and some drink." Gaelic again.

Connor, still blushing, hurries to tell the man. *"I was married for a lifetime. I'm not a priest, I do enjoy women but not... uh well."* He gestures uncertainly at the wall where the man left, blushing even harder.

That the beautiful naked woman moves with a practiced smooth sensuality, picking up a silk robe and carefully dressing Mao in it, is not helping him.

Connor gratefully seats himself by the table pulling more of the thin silk in front of him.

"Forgive me, I didn't expect you to be so young. I assumed you'd be past your fifth century, not closer to your first. Since you're here for a second teacher." Mao seats himself after being properly robed.

"What age has to do with this? I've no such interests in men, regardless of my age." Connor tries not to be impolite. Still, there is a limit to what he will accept.

"Perhaps. With age comes perspective."

It's less than a thousand years ago when your preferences would not have been asked at all. Any healthy good looking young male, like yourself, would be expected to please his elders, if they were so inclined.

Another thousand years before that, males were for pleasure and females for bearing children.

Yet another thousand years earlier you were either a slave or a master, preferences having nothing to do with it in any way."

Mao has a surprisingly kind smile, counting the harsh tone of the history lesson just given.

Connor thinks about it as the table is being set.

Ramirez used to say that knowing history will help to live the future. At the time he had thought it nonsense. All that he needed was food and a good sword!

With the teachings of Ramirez, pounding the use of finesse into him. With the wisdom and lectures of Nakano, he can now see the truth in those words.

They have spent so much time discussing the intricacies of honor, Connor suddenly wonders what other things he has missed. Because, of course, the ideas of proper behavior have changed as much as those of honor or clothes.

It would be stupid to think otherwise. Connor had been stupid not to consider it.

He also accepts the apology and the history lesson for the underhanded compliment it is. *"That was a perspective I did not have before. I thank you for your insight."*

Mao views him with childishly open surprise, then throws his head back and laughs. A free unrestrained and honest laugh.

He reaches out his hand to touch Connor in the face, curiosity in his expressive eyes. Connor stiffens but stays still, very uncomfortable with such intimacy.

Mao brushes his fingers lightly down Connor's cheek, before taking the hand back quickly.

"I'm sorry. You can have no idea what an unusual creature you are." He gives an impish grin and a wink. *"In this age, in this place, it would be beyond impolite to use a Student of another. Without permission."*

A wave of his hand and the guide/translator starts to pour tea. For a man who does not speak Japanese, he seems incredibly at home with his surroundings.

Connor remembers his first months with some embarrassment. Maybe Chinese customs are closer than what the Japanese seem to think.

They wait in silence for the tea, then drink it in silence.

~ 1646 ~

Connor tries to understand the man opposite of him. Wondering if that last was a joke or not.

The man seems open and friendly, the laugh is genuine. Still, he covered the grief instantly, with no trace of it now. He implied that he was older than 3000 years.

Ramirez had a similar outlook, he was happy and enjoyed what there was at any given time, maybe this is what you need to live long. Or what you become if you do. Nakano is not like that, but he still smiles a lot and, most of the time, has that amused glint in his eyes.

Without thinking, Connor breaks etiquette and speaks first. *"Is this how you are, to survive, or how you become by doing it?"*

Mao is delighted. *"Deep thoughts, huh?"*

"All older Immortals I've meet, are either bloodthirsty maniacs or enjoys what life has to offer..." Connor tries to explain his thoughts.

"Do you mean that the bloodthirsty maniacs are not enjoying their life?" Mao challenges him with a wicked grin.

That makes Connor pause, again something he never considered before. Of course they enjoy it! Only they are not caring what others think, or even enjoy other's pain. But, oh yes, they certainly enjoy their life.

"I certainly enjoy taking theirs." He challenges back, with a grin of his own, remembering too late that he is unarmed.

Mao laughs, his eyes fairly sparkling with amusement. *"Good thing that bloodthirsty maniac is not the current way to be then, remind me to stay out of your way when it is!"* Just a hint of gravity in those eyes.

"I don't believe that bloodthirsty maniac is ever going to be the way to be. There are always other options." Connor almost bites his tongue after that. Considering the earlier topic that may not always have been the case in the past, and who knows what the future may bring.

Mao shrugs. *"Yes, you could always be a slave or die."* Then he smiles. *"We're far too sober for this discussion, lets have some drinks and food."*

He speaks some Chinese and the translator takes the other woman and leaves. Then he points at the table and makes a dismissive gesture, looking at the young woman who came with Connor. She bows and hurries to remove the tea set.

Connor has no problems seeing this man as a master rather than a slave. If those were the choices given. He tries to see himself in a situation like that, but his imagination is not up to the task. He would rather die than yield!

But what would he do to others, in order to remain alive and free? He does not know, he hopes to never find out. Now ^{^that^} was a piece of self-knowledge he would rather not have.

The two women return with trays of food and sake.

Mao asks how Connor came to be in Japan, and a student of Nakano. He then skillfully continues to coax the entire life story out of him.

At one point they move to another room with a large stone bath. Without much interruption his young woman explains that he needs to wash before entering the water, Connor allows himself to be washed.

Mao is respectfully standing with his back to Connor as he is washed by both the man and the young translator.

Connor may be slightly embarrassed by the effects of being thoroughly cleaned by a beautiful young woman. Mao, in a similar state, just laughs and claims the warm water will solve that.

It turns out he is right about that, and soon the conversation continues while sipping sake in the steaming water.

They laugh about how hard and long Ramirez had to hit him before he learned. How frightened he had been of drowning, just to learn he could not.

Mao laughingly tells of Ramirez's first attempts to make a steel sword. They wistfully talk of falling in love with a mortal, and share stories of inconsequential things. Like the first time they saw fireworks.

Connor speaks of his travels and about Duncan, his clansman and student. There is a shared edge in their wish to kill the Kurgan. Both wishing they get the chance, but will not begrudge the other one, if he finds him first.

They swim in the river to cool down. Then go back to the heated room, where Mao finally gets the rest of his massage and nails done. For Connor a heated oil massage by a skilled woman and his young woman together.

After agreeing to meet for breakfast, Mao jokes about Connor being a prude and they go separate ways.

Connor in the company of the young woman and the skilled masseuse. Mao with the man and the translator.

~ 1646 ~

Connor wakes up in a soft bed with silk sheets. He has a feeling that morning may have passed by long.

His body feeling more relaxed and content than in a long time. He stretches and sits up, looking around for his clothes. They are neatly folded on the low bench at the other end of the room.

Getting up, the soft matt crouching a little under his feet, on the bed next to him lies another silk robe. Indecisive he stands there a moment.

The wall to his right slides open a little, revealing the keeling young beauty from the day before. Connor searches his memory, Kaga, her name was... Uh, well she is called Kaga.

She is quickly by his side, dressing him in the silk robe. It is thicker than the one he had yesterday. She also provides a pair of warm slippers, informing Connor. *"The Honored Guest Mao Zhu asked if you would like to join him for breakfast, in the inner courtyard, as you please."*

Connor agrees to this and is soon guided to the large heated room.

Today the stove is not lit, and the walls on two opposite sides are fully pulled back. Revealing the river on one side, and a small inner courtyard on the other. Looking out over the river he sees the palace on the other side.

It is closer to midday than morning, as he suspected. A table is currently being set in the center of the courtyard.

When stepping out on the inner courtyard Connor sees that the walls on the other side are also open, but only in the direction of the courtyard. Behind, in the room on the other side, there are several people and plenty of scrolls and books.

Mao is sitting close to the courtyard, he seems to be reading using one hand to keep track of where he is and the other to write on another scroll.

"I'll be right with you, oh enlightened one, have a seat while you wait." He says without looking up.

Enlightened?! Where the hell did that come from? If anyone here is enlightened it would be Mao. How did he know I was there anyway? Oh, the ... no. Connor stands there looking at nothing while he thinks.

Yesterday the Presence of the other Immortal had not touched him until he entered the same room. Usually, he would feel another a bit further than that. However, not once after they met has he been outside the Presence. Not even when he left the house to take care of his morning needs, which would have been a good bit outside of his own range.

Is it possible to choose what range you will be felt?

When the walls on the other side slide shut, Connor blinks and looks around. The table is set so that they both sit with the river in their view. Mao is just seating himself.

"Enlightened one?" Connor asks as he seats himself.

Mao laughs and gesticulates at his hair. *"That, with the sun in it, makes it look like you have a halo."*

Connor smiles. *"Oh, yes I'm the saint of... good taste!"*

"I don't know about that. You turned me down, that's not very good taste..." Mao laughingly disagrees.

Once more Connor fails to stop himself from blushing. *"I meant of good food, of course! Anyone who turns you down, oh magnificent one, has no taste in the beauty of men!"* Connor glances at Mao, too much?

Mao hollers with laughter. *"Good save, young one, good save!"*

They talk some, Connor promises to show Mao the market after they have eaten.

They are finishing their meal when Connor remembers. *"Can you change the range of your Quickening? I didn't feel you until just when I entered the room yesterday. Still, today we've been further apart than so."*

"I'm not your Teacher, I don't take Students. Any questions, save them for your Teacher."
Mao's face shows no expression, the eyes a green flint reflecting in the sun.

Connor feels the adrenaline as his body readies itself for a fight. He tries to think when the familiar eagerness floods his body. I will not make the first move, Nakano said don't Challenge him. Why am I reacting like this? He did not Challenge me.

With hands still shaking he drinks some tea, trying to figure what just happened. He tries to remember any other time when he has reacted like this, nothing thing comes to mind.

Why did Mao turn me down so hard? It was just a question.

"I'm not your Teacher, I don't take Students."

He said, all of it equally important.

What was it Ramirez said about taking Students? Connor remembers.

"Any Student will be like having a child, taking a Student is a huge responsibility. Once you take a Student you will be The Teacher until one of you die."

Nakano has said something like it at some point.

"I will take anyone willing to learn as my Student. This makes me a skilled Teacher, but never a great one. You can only give your soul to a few, I shatter mine in a hundred pieces so that I may stay safe from The Game."

Connor thinks about Duncan, yes like a child, he thinks about him, worries about him, brag about him. A piece of his soul, yes he will always try to save, help or protect Duncan.

So Mao's reaction was not that surprising, again Connor will have to admit lacking the necessary perspective.

Still, his own reaction to the rejection worries him more. Why would he want to fight Mao for telling him to talk to his Teacher? Because Nakano will not tell him? Nakano might not know.

To take the knowledge, gain the knowledge by force? So far the heads he has taken have not given him any great insights or powers, why would that change now?

Because you know what you are looking for this time! His mind supplies him.

No! I'm not going to take a head just for a trick!

Even if you thought you had a chance to succeed? His mind mocks him.

Forcefully pushing those thoughts aside, Connor takes another sip of tea turning back to Mao. Wondering how long he has been woolgathering.

Mao appears to be comfortably seated with a cup of tea in one hand and a scroll in the other. Unaware? Unafraid? Connor searches for hidden tension.

Mao glances up at him. *"This is still Sacred Land."* He raises an eyebrow. *"And I believe you came here unarmed, am I wrong, young one?"* The flint eyes are now a deep unreadable jade.

Connor feels like he just had a sword of ice run through him. Not unaware! How could he forget that this is Holy Ground?

I am unarmed. Mao is the servant of a Chinese Prince, I bet he is not.

And Connor had once thought that bowing unarmed when the guards were armed to be the scariest thing he could do...

He bows until his forehead touches the sun-warmed stone. *"Honored Mao Zhu, please forgive my inappropriate question."* A deep breath for courage, and to bite down on his pride. *"If you still wish this child to guide you, it will be my honor."* Gaelic is the wrong language for this type of formality, but it is the one they have.

"We leave shortly, get dressed." No emotion, just information.

Connor hears a rustle of silk, Mao stands. He looks up to see the wall close behind Mao.

~ 1646 ~

Connor hurries to get dressed, not letting Kaga help him this time. He leaves half of the money Nakano gave him in the room. Soon he is standing outside waiting, trying hard not to think.

The ice sword in his stomach twists when Mao walks out in perfectly fitted silk clothes, heavily embroidered, and a Jian sword with a 31 in (~80cm) blade at his side.

"Well, young one, they've any nice secluded places in this town?" Mao gives a sly smile.

Connor feels his knees wanting to give in under him. He should run to Nakano, hoping he can set this right. No, I offered I have to do it!

He is sure he is as pale as Mao by now. *"There is one not far from here."* Connor bows.

Mao gestures for him to show the way, small talking on the way.

Connor tries to keep up his part, luckily it is not far to the fruit garden in the outskirts of the village.

They enter and Connor gathers his scattered courage and/or wit. At the center of the garden he faces Mao. Connor might be unarmed, but he will not yield without a fight.

"Well, is that a Challenge, young one?" Mao looks at him with a sardonic smile.

"No. I do not wish to Challenge. I apologize for my unacceptable behavior." Connor bows.

"Oh... Will you kneel and give me your neck again then?" Mao licks his lips in expectation.

A chill runs through Connor, bloodthirsty alright. *"No. I will apologize, if you wish me to do something for you I might. However, I will not yield my head without fighting."*

Connor squares his shoulders and meets Mao's gaze, ready to fight for his life.

Mao throws his head back and laughs, when he smilingly looks at Connor there is gold in the deep jade green eyes. *"The fire of the young."* He chuckles. *"Apology accepted."* Mao turns serious. *"Are you truly unarmed?"*

Connor nods. *"It was almost impossible to gain the permit to stay. To be armed as well, that wouldn't have been possible."*

Mao seems disapproving, but does not say anything more about it. Instead, he smilingly asks with a wink. *"Shall we go to the market and see if we can find our beautiful friends at the Temple some gifts?"*

Connor nods and joins Mao walking. *"I've to admit I'm unsure of what I'm expected to give, and how."*

"The rules of the Temple provide food clothes and education, during their stay. But nothing beyond that. However, any and all gifts belong to the one given. As you are staying with me, all expenses and fees to the Temple are paid by the Prince."

"I can not accept that! I have money, the Prince..." Connor starts.

"The Prince is happy to pay for you, I've already told him that Nakano sent you to me." Stated as a simple fact, not leaving any room for argument.

Connor sees he does not know enough of what is going on. Nakano sent him to Mao; asking him to try to stay out of politics and wait to be recalled. He has little choice but to stay with Mao until he sends Connor back.

"So who gets the money I left in the bedroom?" Connor changes the subject.

"It should still be there when you get back, stealing is severely punished." Mao says smiling.
"You left money when you were not sure to return?"

"They took good care of me, not their fault that I seem to need several hard hits in the head before I learn to think before acting." Connor snorts self-deprecating.

Mao's smile turns into a laugh. *"Well at least you ^can^ think, that's rare in the young ones. If you practice the habit it becomes easier, you'll see."*

"So at what age am I not young anymore?" Connor is getting a little annoyed at being called "young one".

"So I'm thinking some nice jewelry for Hanao, and maybe clothes for Yanagi. Maybe jewelry for both, jewelry is always easy to exchange for whatever you need. What do you think Connor?" Mao happily ignores the question, a slight gleam of flint in the eyes.

Damn, not a Teacher, do not ask about Immortal things. I understand. Yes, I need more practice thinking.

"I've never met a woman who doesn't appreciate gold and precious stones." Connor smiles at Mao.

They spend the afternoon buying gifts. Connor practices his Japanese; Mao uses him as a translator.

Not long after they arrive at the market they get company from two town Guards, they seem content to just follow them.

Mao snorts at them. *"Why do they give weapons to idiots who can't care for them? Look at that scabbard. It's dirty!"*

Immensely happy that they are speaking Gaelic, Connor mutters. *"As long as I'm unarmed, I won't complain that the ones with weapons are unskilled enough for me to take one at need."*

Mao laughs at that. Then hires a boy to carry the things they buy.

Several hours later they are back at the house. Their guards stayed at the gate. But the poor boy, loaded like a mule, follows them inside.

Mao gives his orders in Chinese as soon as the wall closes behind them. The boy is unloaded, the things are quickly sorted into Connor's and Mao's then carried away.

"A light meal with a view of the river?" Mao invites him.

Connor bows and follows Kaga back to his room.

~ 1646 ~

She skillfully undresses him, when they are done he worries he might be late.

"Honored Elder Sister, Hanao, said there was some time before the food would be ready." She explains a little nervously.

"Thank you, Kaga. Had you told me this right away it would have helped to relax me, made it easier for you." He can not help smiling at the young woman.

She nods, then she says. *"Honored Guest Connor, I will get a signal when the food is ready to be served."* A shy smile.

Connor smiles back. *"Any possibility to get cleaned up some, before?"*

"Yes, Honored Guest Connor. Not time for a proper bath I am afraid."

Connor follows her over the inner courtyard, walls on all four sides closed now, to the bath. A while later he enters the large riverside room, dressed in trousers and a tunic.

In similar clothes, with an additional robe, Mao already sits in the opening to the river, reading.

The stove in the center is lit, providing a comfortable warmth in the room despite the open riverside wall. Connor seats himself and watches the effects of the sunset on the rooftops and walls on the other side of the river.

Soon a table being prepared not far from the stove.

Then the translator bows in front of Mao. He looks up nods, and move over to the table, Connor joins him.

They discuss different kinds of foods and drinks they have tried, this conversation slides into embarrassing cultural mistakes made. Mao has one for everyone Connor can come up with.

It is also obvious that Mao has been a warrior, healer, priest, husband, father, and just about anything else.

Mao is not holding back. Connor has a hard time reconciling the Healer, who rather starve than eat meat, with the Warrior eating a human heart raw, as his rightful reward for a victory won.

Connor finds the food a little hard to swallow after the last part, still, he has to scold himself. When he was young it was not unheard of that a hunter claimed the heart of a prey, in order to honor the animal's bravery... He mentions this.

Mao smiles and nods. *"If local custom allows, I'll prefer my meat cooked and with good spices."*

He does not mention what type of meat, Connor does not ask. Instead, he tells of his first attempt to eat with sticks and gets Mao's first contact with a fork in return.

After the meal they have tea.

"Even if you can't be armed, it's not good to go without training. I had your sword delivered for you. You may use the inner courtyard for practice." Mao waves for someone behind Connor to come over.

An armed Chinese warrior is carrying a wrapped sword. He comes over and holds it out for Connor with a bow.

Connor stands and accepts the sword with a bow of his own. He is shaken that anyone could stand behind him with a sword. Holy Ground will not protect him from mortals.

He also bows at Mao, who is looking at him with a sharp curiosity and some amusement.

Connor realizes that the clothes given to him are good for this. Damn the man! He likes to push. For a non-Teacher, he is way too fond of giving lessons.

"Thank you, I appreciate having my sword back." Connor bows.

"I have to admit I was tempted to keep it." Mao says with a smirk on his face.

"It would have been a nice trophy don't you agree?" He holds out his hands with a big smile.

~ 1985 Trinity Church Cemetery ~

Trinity Church Cemetery

~ 1986 ~

"Mao! Or Ben, right?" Connor switches to Gaelic without thinking.

He can't help himself as he smiles and steps forward, taking the smiling man's hand in a warrior's grip.

"Yes, Ben is fine. Benjamin is the name in my passport. You? Russell Nash, is it? Or are you moving, now that you've won?" The seemingly young man asks in a schooled modern English, with a touch of Wales.

"I'm leaving, yes. But it's not over. You and me, both here, prove that." Connor, also in English, watches the older Immortal.

There are questions and maybe a little accusation in his eyes when they let go of each other.

"I'm glad you managed to lose your tail, so that we may talk."

I couldn't risk them seeing me with you, it took careful planning just to drop the message for you. I won't explain or answer questions about my current identity, don't bother to ask."

Connor's hackles rise. But Mao is here for a reason, and pushing has never been the way to get anything from him. Connor bites back his response and waits.

"I've told you before, I don't have all the answers. With that said, there are some things I've learned over time, and some I've not heard of until later. If you're willing to listen." The Immortal currently called Ben seems serene in a way he never did as Mao, eyes dark in the shadowed graveyard.

Connor gestures "go ahead" with one hand.

The older starts to walk, Connor follows without a word. They step out of the graveyard side by side, grinning a little at each other when leaving Holy Ground.

~ 1986 ~

Walking the almost empty streets Ben starts to talk. Going silent whenever anyone comes near and not once looking directly at Connor.

"As far back as the oldest immortal I've met, or heard of, there have been questions of why and how. There are several different ideas theories and beliefs explored throughout the ages. We live longer, this means that religions take longer to develop. Not that they don't."

The belief of "The Game" is, like most religions, a pick and choose from earlier ideas, built into dogma over time. A lot like Christianity, in Europe and America, The Game is something

even those who refuse to believe in it have been forced to adapt to. For now, it's the strongest, and by far most aggressive, of the beliefs among immortals.

The Game, more or less as it looks like today has been dominant for approximately three millennia. And around in some form, far longer.

I don't know if "The One" will or won't have the power to rule the earth. Or become mortal, or whatever the winner wishes for. I don't know if there will ever be a time when no new immortals emerge. I meet a pre-immortal six-year-old the other day, so not yet anyway. I don't know where immortals come from. Or why it's never another immortal that finds them, always mortals.

I do know, that way back in ancient times, there was no greater taboo than to deliberately kill another immortal permanently. That was the one thing that was not acceptable. Anything else, up to and including eternal slavery, imprisonment, and genocide of mortals, was acceptable. But not that.

I do know, that no matter how many heads you take, certain Powers come only with time. Never by taking a Quickening. Skills can be learned by Quickening, but only when you are old enough to use the Power.

I do know that a Gathering can be called by any immortal who has reached his or her third Age. That usually happens when you are around two millennia.

A normal Gathering will Call anyone under the Age of the Caller, within the range of the Caller. Anyone older, within range, will Feel the Call and has the choice of entering or not.

Unless they are devout believers of The Game, then they either don't know they can turn the Call down, or they think it's their duty to answer and issue a Call of their own... I don't think there are any of the later kind left today.

There are a few older who might answer a Call with a Call of their own, just for the fun of it. Tre... No, two, that I know still lives ^ and ^ has the knowledge. One or two more who might do it instinctively.

A Gathering won't stop until there's one Winner, the Winner will get a Prize.

The Caller decides the rules and participates in the Gathering by the same rules. This means if the Caller is a believer of The Game, who came into his third Age without anyone teaching him and made the Call as an instinctive bid for power because he was panicking. Then the rules will be the ones of The Game.

The Winner decides the Prize unless the Caller has done so. If the Winner is unaware of how a Call works, the Prize will be the closest possible to the Winner's hope of what 'The Prize' would be.

Right now, you feel like a pre-immortal to anyone who doesn't know better. This will last for approximately one mortal lifetime, or until you take a weapon in hand with the purpose of

taking a head. If you don't take the head, for whatever reason, you will go back to feeling like a pre-immortal. Until the time is up.

The time ^ will ^ run out. Don't stop training.

The pre-immortal feeling is common among those who wish for a mortal life, family, and staying in one place. If that was in your dream, then you'll probably be able to stay, wherever you are going, for longer than you are used to. Not a lifetime, but for forty or fifty years.

I don't know if it'll be that people don't notice, or if you'll actually appear to age. That differs from person to person.

Most of us want children. If that was in your dream, there will probably be one in your near future. Either the woman you love was already pregnant, or adoption. Unless you are fine with her getting pregnant by someone else, then that's also an option.

If you had a different dream, then the Prize will be different."

~ 1986 ~

They walk for a while, but before Connor thinks of asking anything, the tall slender man next to him continues talking.

"I've no idea when the first immortal got beheaded.

But I've heard a myth of how. She got killed and eaten by a pack of lions. They tore the head off, and her poor Student got the Quickening. Before this, no one knew it was possible to kill an immortal.

Before anyone had heard or dreamed of The Game, the most common belief among immortals was that they were gods who got incarnated as humans. To first learn and study, then teach and lead.

As I mentioned before, the taking of an immortal's head was Taboo. The only reason it would be an outspoken Taboo, was if it had happened. It's fully possible to cut off a head with a good stone axe or a flint spear, hunting or woodcutting equipment.

But the first incarnations of The Game came with the Bronze age and swords. There's only one use for a sword; to kill or maim another human. For a couple of millennia they coexisted.

The old ones were horrified. Oh, and easy prey. Even if they were often skilled hunters and defenders of their clans families tribes or followers, they were not warriors.

Also, the Taboo of killing immortals meant that, even if they did win, they often let their enemies live to try again later.

Many of them took to hiding on Holy or Sacred ground. This meant that they were no longer part of everyday life with their mortals, losing the personal contact made the mortals scared.

Scared of other immortals. And then, after a generation or so, of their own immortals. Now the mortals too started killing immortals.

The old ones grew desperate. They banded together in groups, for protection and safety in numbers. Many of the old Pantheons comes from these attempts.

And as the myths tell: Unless they got trapped for eternity, more or less successfully. They were mostly killed by their own, or other 'Gods'. Around the time of thousand BC, there were only a scattered few of the old ones left.

Before the bronze age, an immortal wouldn't be considered ready to leave the First Teacher until after, at least, a lifetime.

The young immortal would be expected to travel and learn until he or she came into their first Age. This usually happens somewhere around your fifth century. Then they would either return or get a second teacher.

By thousand BC there were very few immortals who even knew that anymore. As the old ones were killed and the younger ones lost the knowledge, a five centuries-old immortal was suddenly considered an old and experienced one.

Ramirez First Teacher was barely two centuries old, and a devoted believer in The Game. He did what has later become the usual among those. Told him the rules, gave him a weapon, and told him to run until he was skilled enough. Oh... and good luck!

Give or take a few years of training with the sword.

Luckily, Ramirez managed to stumble onto one of the students of an old one who had adapted not long after that. Tjanefer taught Ramirez in the Old Ways, with the addition of sword mastery.

But, as you know, Ramirez was still stuck with the Imprinting of The Game from his first Teacher. Spending the rest of his life fighting himself as much as others, looking for a way to remove the Imprinting.

That was how ^he^ ended up with Nakano his first time."

~ Flashback: 1646 Temple of Joy ~

Reflection

~ 1646 ~

It is a clear morning, Connor is up early to do his katas in the courtyard.

In the past weeks, it has become a habit. After the katas, he will do one of the meditations that Nakano taught him, still in the courtyard. Then he will get cleaned up before breakfast with Mao.

Served either in the courtyard or the large room on the riverside, depending on the weather. If it is a sunny day the walls on the large eastern room are open and the opposite room will be opened when the sun reaches that wall, like the first morning.

If it is a rainy day he is left alone in the courtyard, all the walls closed.

The south side of the house contains the entrance, and his room lying next to the dressing room from the first day, in the southeastern corner. The bath is in the northeast corner with an adjacent dressing room.

The northern and western sides of the house are not open to Connor. Mao and a whole staff of people are working there. Neither has Connor been introduced to any of the Chinese staff.

Mao will enter the courtyard or the eastern rooms for social interaction.

~ 1646 ~

During breakfast the second morning, Connor asked if Chinese is difficult to learn.

Mao laughed for a good long time. Then he asked if Connor would think European hard to learn?

After some good-humored jokes about assumptions, and a lesson in Chinese geography, Mao arranged for Yanagi, the man Mao favors, to teach him after their breakfasts.

This has also become a habit, after breakfast Connor learns the Chinese language that Yanagi speaks.

Because Yanagi only knows Japanese and Chinese, they sometimes have a whole list of words for Mao and Hanao, the guide/translator from the first evening, to translate and explain to them.

The leisurely midday meal often stretches out for hours while they discuss languages and the meanings of words.

If the weather is warm, Mao and Connor will explore the small town in the afternoon. If not, they sit in the heated room while Mao is teaching Connor the game Go.

Sometimes Mao is called to the palace by his Prince, always in the late afternoon or evening. Those days, Yanagi or Hanao will play and/or continue the language lessons with him.

In the evenings, after a good meal, they will bathe, get a massage, and drink large amounts of sake. There is no discussing local or Chinese politics, nor Immortal skills, other than that everything is encouraged.

They compare politics and military strategies in historic times with current in other countries or parts of the world. They argue morals, current or past ones. Sometimes Mao will tell or explain, but mostly he just laughs and argues. Never giving any indication of what he truly thinks himself, always playing the devil's advocate.

A few times Connor takes a discussion from a previous day and turns the tables, using all the arguments that Mao used, and whatever own he has thought of. Mao will laugh and cut down his own arguments as viciously as he did Connor's, once or twice with Connor's arguments.

This derails their discussions into argumentation techniques and the importance of how to deliver an opinion.

They gossip about other immortals. For each story Connor has, Mao can give one back. However, it is always second-hand stories, never his own.

Mao will tell of his own experiences but never with another Immortal friend. Always alone, or with mortals, rarely with Immortals he considers enemies.

There are two exceptions. If they talk about Ramirez, or if he tells of an Immortal who dies.

Not even when Connor asks about Nakano, will Mao tell of anything they have done together.

~ 1646 ~

"Is this a rule you have, not telling of things you've done with other Immortals?" Connor asks at one point.

Mao smiles. *"It's dangerous to let other immortals know too much about you. I try not to tell things that might put friends, or Students of friends, in danger."*

"Unless it's a story I've heard from somewhere else, then I'll consider where I heard it, and decide if it's common knowledge."

Connor thinks about it. Many of the stories have been of other Immortal's bad habits, weaknesses, fears, and tempers. Things you could use to befriend, or kill, someone.

He considers what stories he has already told himself.

With a chill, he sees that Mao now has much knowledge about most of the immortals he considers his friends, including Duncan. More than enough to be able to find them and kill them if that is his goal.

Hoarding knowledge is a good long-term strategy, with plenty of short-term benefits and no real drawbacks. Will Mao use this information? No. Wrong question. Of course, he will.

^How^ will Mao use the information?

Has my stupidity and inexperience gotten my friends, my Student killed? What can I do about that now?

Again, Connor has to fight the urge to attack Mao. Every so often this urge resurfaces, he has no idea from where. He likes Mao, and the man has been a good host, a friend. Why does this urge to fight him keep coming?

His mind whispers. If you kill him everyone will be safe.

He bites back the urge, trying to think.

Kill him? He has watched me do katas for days and I have just told him everything about me. I still have not seen Mao, even draw, his sword.

Beg? No, that will not change his mind.

Hope that a Student of a Student of a friend is enough to leave Duncan, and cut my losses with the rest?

Oh, God how did we end up here? I asked he answered... Why?

Back to the question of how Mao will use the information.

Connor consciously relaxes and simply asks, looking right at Mao. *"Have I just spent the last weeks killing my friends, and my Student?"* This is Holy Ground, I will have a little time. Connor hopes.

"If I say you have. What will you do about it? And if I say no. Would you believe it?" The face expressionless, eyes a deep pool of possibilities, there is nothing given one way or the other.

The easy one first. Connor decides. *"Yes. I would believe it. No. I don't know why."*

Mao's eyes narrow and he seems thoughtful but says nothing.

"As for what I'll do if I just managed to kill all my friends? I imagine I'll die first." Connor states dryly, with a sardonic smile.

Mao chuckles and pours some more sake for both of them. *"I collect information for protection. I rarely go headhunting. When I do it's for reasons."*

Connor nods. He is not entirely surprised, or reassured, by the noncommittal answer. *"So not all of them. But maybe some of them if they were already on your list."* Connor wavers between cutting his losses and curiosity. *"What does someone have to do, to make your list?"*

Mao goes serious, his eyes meet Connor's. *"I've no set rules about that, it has changed over time."*

To simplify. If you want to kill a friend of mine, you better make sure that it was a Challenge given, Challenge accepted, situation. Clear enough?"

"Don't go headhunting, more or less." Connor considers this with a thoughtful nod. *"What if a friend of yours decides to go headhunting?"*

"If a friend of mine would decide to go headhunting? I'd wish them good luck, but I wouldn't automatically consider someone who managed to take their Quickening an enemy."

"And if that friend killed another friend?" What am I missing? There is no logic in this! In everything else, Mao has used logic.

"Then one of them made a fatal mistake." Mao shrugs, with an unshakable finality.

Connor knows they are close to the forbidden subject. When he considers it, he is surprised that he has not been cut off sooner. He revisits what Mao ^did^ said, knowing there was a reason the subject was allowed.

"If a friend of mine would decide to go headhunting?"

As if that was highly unlikely that a friend of his would.

Ramirez mentioned friends he would not fight. He also said to be prepared, he never said go hunt heads.

Nakano has expressed a wish to stay out of The Game. To the point of giving up his personal morals and train people he dislikes, just to keep himself safe.

Mao does not generally keep friends that headhunt? No, he said that he does not avenge people who are headhunting.

So what was the lesson this time? "Be careful who you tell what to." and "Knowledge is power."

Having learned things about several old and dangerous Immortals, things that will definitely help if he ever meets or has to fight them. There is nothing to do but agree. Oh... Connor will remember those lessons, knowing them for important.

Connor realizes he had lost himself in thoughts. Again. He glances at Mao. Mao has picked up a scroll and is reading, like so many times before when Connor has done this.

He always makes me think. I wonder how much I could learn if he would take me as his Student? No! Dangerous thoughts. That strange urge to fight, to ^take^ the knowledge, surges through him. Connor pushes it back, hard.

He decides to talk about it with Nakano. Time to change the subject.

A smile, so it is not taken too seriously. *"So, how long am I banished here? Nakano said a few days, it's been a week."*

Mao puts down the scroll, sips some sake before he answers with a smile. *"Are you in such a hurry to get out of here? Kaga doesn't please you anymore?"* The smile turns into a teasing grin. *"You could borrow Yanagi if you wish..."*

Connor has not yet stopped blushing about the thought of himself with a man.

Mao laughs, but takes pity on him and answers the question honestly. *"My Prince has given Nakano a commission one that is both secret and personal. Until it's done you'll stay with me, as the Prince has requested. I believe he'll do the one I brought as well. Otherwise, he should've been done by now."*

~ 1646 ~

That conversation was eight days ago, Connor reflects as he stretches after his meditation.

He is starting to get restless. It has been more than two weeks since he came here and there is something itching. He has been forced to stop himself from picking a fight with Mao several times, just these last days.

Mao is the perfect friendly host. Connor is confused and feeling more and more pent up. It has been harder to repress the urge to fight every day.

He sinks into the bath with a content sigh, letting all thoughts leave him.

~ 1646 ~

Rather than meet him at breakfast as usual Mao slides into the bath with him.

Connor reaches for his sword and attacks before he can think.

Mao grabs his right arm and breaks it, taking the sword. Then throws Connor across the bathtub into the stone ledge on the other side. Before Connor has the time to move, Mao is holding his own katana over his left arm. The eyes are as flint when he presses Connor down over the hard stone edge of the bath.

Connor's right arm twists painfully and he can not find any purchase for his feet with half his body out of the tub. He stills, knowing that he has lost.

Mao coldly moves the sharp katana to Connor's throat, leaving a bleeding wound on the left arm. *"Yield."* The stone edge cutting Connor's back feels soft and safe compared to the hard voice and stony eyes.

"I yield." Connor says. Very carefully, he knows exactly how sharp that sword is.

Mao sits back at the other side of the bathtub, Connors sword still in his hand.

Connor slides back into the bath, the Quickening is healing him rapidly, and his mind finally catches up with the events.

God, forgive me, what did I do? Why? Have mercy, this is Holy Ground! How could I forget that? Oh, Lord, mercy on my soul. How could I? No Challenge. No warning. What is this?

He gathers his courage and faces Mao.

"Do you agree I won this, or do we need to go outside and do it again?" The unreadable eyes search his soul.

He won, why is he asking that? Connor wonders.

His mind treacherously whispers that a true Challenge would have ended differently.

"No! Damn it what is this!? I have no wish to Challenge. Why?"

"Outside it is. Get dressed!" There is a snap in the order and Connor is halfway to his clothes before his anger catches up with him.

He starts to turn at Mao, then he catches himself. I yielded, it is his right. I attacked an unarmed man without warning, I deserve no mercy. Connor bites his tongue hard, until it bleeds, and gets dressed.

One side of him whispers: I can take him, he is a drunk scribe, the reason I have not seen him train is that he ^{is} not training. He only drinks, fucks, and reads, I can take him.

The other says: He won fair. It does not matter if I can win. This is not right! Besides, that is not the body of someone who does not train.

When they leave the house Connor remembers the first morning. Something is wrong, has been the whole time.

He is surprised when they go for the back of the temple area, rather than to the garden Connor took them that first morning. Mao still has Connor's katana, and now he has his own sword too.

There is a low stone wall around a circular dirt area. Mao confidently stalks over to the other side, lays Connor's sword on the ground, and returns back.

He faces Connor, asking with a condescending smirk and a relaxed pose. *"This isn't Sacred Ground. You believe you have a chance child?"*

"I don't want to fight you! I've no idea what is happening. Am I possessed?" Connor struggles to get his mind in order.

But somehow he walks over to the sword. When he picks it up it is like clarity washes over him, he can focus... on the fight. If he tries to move away it is a struggle and he finds it hard

to think.

Mao waits patiently, with an amused air to his smirk.

Connor relaxes and focuses, is this The Gathering? He pushes his hesitation aside and moves forward. He is too slow.

Mao disarms him immediately, then steps back and lets him pick up his sword again.

The second try is no more successful. This time Mao closes on him, step inside his guard, rams his long Jian through Connor's belly on the way.

Again he steps back and lets Connor regain his balance, the smirk has not left him at any point.

Connor directs his Quickening to the wound, like he was taught, and gathers himself. He is outclassed, but that is not the first time in his life. Stubbornly he collects all that he has, he will not give up! The thunder crack and rain pour when Connor closes in to make his final move.

Mao grins and moves in with the wind.

Connor finds himself on the ground without his sword, yet again. Exhausted like he has never been before, defeated he lowers his head and waits. As he gives in to the unavoidable, the fog starts to lift from his mind.

~ 1646 ~

It takes a little time before he can identify the odd sound. Then he looks up in confusion.

Mao sits on the low stone wall and laughs, soaking wet by the still pouring rain. *"Come, young one, let us get some dry clothes and breakfast. You'll need to ask your Teacher about Imprintings."*

Connor rises, his wound almost healed. *"About what?"* The rain cools him and revives his energy, washing away the last fog in his mind.

"Imprintings." Mao now has a sad smile. *"It'll be easier now, we've established hierarchy. Ask Nakano, but remember this was not your fault."*

I'm impressed by your willpower. I thought you would've done this ten days ago, and that last attack..." There is an admiring smile from Mao. *"Ramirez taught you well indeed. It's a shame he didn't have time to finish it."*

"Imprintings..." Connor tastes the word. *"As in someone or something made me act this way."* He muses. *"Established hierarchy helps? As in who is the strongest Immortal in an area or group, I assume..."* Connor glances nervously at Mao. *"Forgive me, thinking aloud, not asking."*

He gets a smile back, it does not reach the eyes.

They are sad and tired now, old beyond description, the usual brilliant green a mottled deep pool of age. *"I was waiting for this."*

Nakano sent word that he's done with the commission for the Prince a couple of days ago.

We'll eat, then it's time for me to visit him. In the name of the Prince, of course!" A small laugh and a wink make him look like the man Connor knows again.

They go back to the house. Not going through the entrance this time, they slip into the bath the back way.

Mao quickly undresses and slides into the bath. *"Come. Use your tunic to wipe off the blood."* He points at the ledge Connor was pushed against not so long ago. *"Connor?"*

Before we have company, please." Mao watches him patiently.

Connor shrugs and takes off the bloody clothing, doing what Mao asked. When he is done he looks for somewhere to dispose of the incriminating rag.

Mao waives for him to give it to him.

Connor starts to, then he realizes he still has his sword in his hand. He stops and carefully puts it down on the floor. *"Please, forg..."*

He is interrupted. *"I said, not your fault. Do you still need to take my head?"*

"No! I didn't want to the first time either! For God's sake.." Connor is confused, but he has no urge to go for Mao now. Relieved he notices that what Mao said earlier, that it will be easier, is true.

The peace holds, established hierarchy... imprintings. Yes, he has many questions for Nakano.

"Will Nakano have the answers for me?" He asks Mao, giving him the ruined tunic.

"He knows the answers. Well, as much as anyone does, at least." A small sly smile. *"This way I force his hand a little. I'm not sure he'd choose to tell you."*

Mao uses the bloody cloth to wipe his sword, then he pulls out a dead rat from behind one of the tables. *"Get in. I feel like breakfast in the bath today."* He smiles and reaches for the gong.

Connor enters the bath and makes sure to clean off the last blood before Hanao joins them.

"We decided to eat here today. Oh, and burn that!" Mao orders her in Chinese pointing at the bloody tunic and dead rat.

Her eyes grow large at the sight of the fairly large rat, soon she is crawling the floor giving apologies. Not until Mao reprimands her quite sharply, reminding her they want their breakfast, does she get up and takes the rat and rag with her.

"That's cruel, to make them think they've rats." Connor remarks, admiring the forethought and simplicity in the rouse.

Mao nods a little, then he dryly states. *"I might've felt bad about it."* He smirks. *"Had I not caught it in my room the first night here."*

"They've rats here? I thought it was too clean for that." Connor is surprised.

"This close to the river, with all the food both here and in the palace on the other side, they're not far. And to be honest, I suspect this house is mostly empty. Not many can afford to hire it. Not that I'll tell them that."

Mao winks at Connor, then continues in a serious tone. *"We'll eat, receive apologies and then walk up to Nakano."*

Just for your information, Nakano asked me to test if you had one specific Imprinting, you did not. I decided to push further, he won't be pleased with me.

I give you my word. Nakano will tell you what he knows about Imprintings, which is more than any other immortal currently alive."

Connor believes that promise without a doubt. He is ^not^ happy about being used in some sort of power-play between the two older Immortals, and that is what it all seems to boil down to in the end. *"So what do you gain from this? Other than me swinging at you like crazy."*

Mao gives an appreciating small bow from where he sits. *"I intend to keep quiet and listen to the explanations."*

"For knowledge? You go through all this work and." Connor sighs and admits. *"At least theoretically."* Before he incredulously continues. *"Risk your head?"*

All for a bit of knowledge most other Immortals never heard about?" He is suddenly insecure, or is it something most do know about? Just not him?

"What else is there? What's worthwhile in the end, if not knowledge?" A cynical smile. *"Everything else will eventually disappear, what you've learned you'll never lose."*

Everything? How old are you to believe... No, to ^know^ that? Connor is unable to meet that old tired gaze without a shudder. He remembers how easily he was disarmed in that circle. Or here in the bath, for that matter. If this man wants his Quickening there is very little he can do.

Yet he searches for knowledge, not power, except knowledge is power. At least according to Mao. To have the absolute conviction. Experience? That every single thing you have will disappear? Why bother to go on? For knowledge?

"Is there truly nothing left of where you came from, your childhood home? The land of your beginning?" Connor finds this hard to believe. Even if everyone was gone, the clans, the people, the Highlands themselves would still remain.

"Oh, you are a perceptive one, Highlander." Mao nods thoughtfully. "Did you know that even the stars change if you give them enough time?"

The rivers dry or flood, the ocean become land, and land sinks into the ocean, forests turn to open plains and plains grow into old forests. Even the mountains change in the end."

The eyes are brighter than Connor has seen before, almost transparent, and lost in memory. "I can't find any of the landmarks of my youth. The stars are not reliable anymore. The people, their language, traditions, and beliefs... all forgotten.

Nothing remains." Mao closes his eyes and sinks deeper into the warm water.

With his eyes closed, he is suddenly looking like a young man, lazy and decadent. Connor is startled when he speaks again.

"Nothing remains, but my knowledge."

The stars? The mountains? "How old... forgive me, not my place to ask. The mountains?" Connor cannot phantom the Highland mountains changing.

~ 1646 ~

Apologies

~ 1646 ~

Before Mao can comment on the question, the wall slides open. The Elder Priestess enters the room, kneeling. Another woman follows her, kneeling next to her.

Connor is happy to hear the Elder Priestess speak in the same Chinese language he has learned. *"The Temple begs to apologize for the unfortunate event earlier. This is Yoake, she will take over as (a title Connor does not understand). Yoake will make sure there are no more unfortunate incidents."*

Mao's eyes narrow. Annoyed he turns to Hanao, who has kneeled next to the entrance. *"Hanao, did I not order breakfast?"*

"I have arranged it in the heated room." The woman introduced as Yoake promptly cut in, before Hanao can answer.

Yoake seems to be the same age as Hanao and, at least, as beautiful. Her Chinese is strongly accented, Connor assumes she is less skilled there.

He has grown to like the intelligent woman who has helped him so much with his language and is not sure he likes this turn of events. But this is between Mao and the Temple, he is just a guest of a guest.

He decides to buy something special for both his language teachers, no matter what happens now.

Mao turns to Yoake, calmly stating. *"I ordered it to be brought here, priestess."*

"It is not proper to eat in the bath. In the heated room, there is a warm breakfast served as we speak." The woman has a beautiful deep voice, she rises and moves gracefully over to one of the tables to pick up one of the robes.

There is a small gasp from the wall where Hanao is still kneeling. The Elder Priestess, who is still on her knees, stiffens a little at that gasp, then she glares reprovngly at Hanao.

A warm breakfast does not give them time to sit longer in the bath if this is what Mao had preferred.

Not sure today, or any other day for that matter, is a good time to tell the other Immortal what is proper. Or what he should or shouldn't do. Connor stays seated. Taking his cue from the way Mao stretches and sinks even deeper into the warm water.

Yoake snaps at Hanao, in Japanese. *"Get a robe for the other one!"*

Connor looks up in surprise, that was actually an insult towards him. That they have an internal ranking, and that there can be snapping, is not surprising. But so far this has not

happened where he has been able to overhear.

To call a guest 'the other one' in front of him? For that matter to address Mao without ^any^ honorifics, before he has acknowledged the introduction? Telling him what to do, no less.

Hanao glances terrified at him, then at the Elder Priestess, and lastly at Mao.

The Elder Priestess seems a little confused at the terrified look from Hanao. *"Hurry up girl. You are no longer in charge of this guest."* She orders.

Have they forgotten that I speak Japanese? Not Hanao, obviously, but she lowers her eyes and does as she is told.

Mao has sunk to his chin with closed eyes.

In a soft voice, speaking Gaelic, he asks. *"Will you tell me what the bitch and the hag said, please?"* The eyes slit open revealing the angry dark flint, in an otherwise completely relaxed face.

"The new mistress of the house seems to have forgotten, or never known, that I speak their language. She told Our Lady to get "the other one" a robe.

The older greeted me when I came here, so she should know. She chose to tell Our Lady to "hurry up woman, you are no longer in charge of this guest". Connor tries to keep a relaxed voice, using no names. Hoping that the use of Our Lady will tell Mao of his feelings in the matter, without interfering in an unduly manner.

Mao gives an almost imperceptible smirk, then asks. *"This guest. You are certain it was not these guests?"*

The woman has moved next to the bath, she is ready with a robe for Mao, who has not made any move to get up. Hanao is standing close to Connor waiting, she has not unfolded the robe yet.

"Yes, I am sure." Connor is starting to get worried, that was a second insult against him and they either don't care, or have not realized.

He tries to get his mind back into the mindset of local customs. Actually, the behavior is even worse from that view.

Not only have they insulted him, and through this, both Nakano and Mao. But, by not using any honorifics and not listen to the wishes of Mao, they could be conceived as giving an insult directed at the Chinese Prince, and through that at the Daimyo.

Suddenly the calm of Mao takes on a different meaning. He is giving them a chance to notice and correct, or enough rope to hang themselves properly.

"I will have our breakfast here. Now." There is no room for discussion in that tone, Mao has turned directly to the Elder Priestess.

She gives an indulging smile, and nods.

Yoake interrupts with a soothing voice. *"The breakfast awaits in the heated room. Come, I will take you."* She has a beautiful smile as well.

A master seductress, but either stupid or arrogant, neither is likely to impress Mao.

Connor glances at Hanao. She is still standing on his right side, looking hard at the floor.

From his vantage, he can see right up in her face. Slightly pale her face is frozen in an impassive pleasant smile, the eyes large in dread. ^She^ certainly isn't clueless about the political ramifications of this.

Mao has not let his eyes leave the Elder Priestess. Now he speaks with a cold clear and precise voice. *"Is this the level of care for guests that is usual in this Temple? If so Hanao has misled me grossly. I have come to expect discreet and skilled handling of any requests I make. Not someone trying to give me, impolite, orders to cover their failure."*

The Elder Priestess's eyes grow larger and her cheeks gain some color, she sits up straight, eyes blazing. Yoake also seems more angry than anything else.

Connor makes sure his sword is within reach, noting that Mao already has his close.

"Honored Elder Priestess of the Temple of joy. Please."

The servant, Master Mao of the Honorable First Chinese Prince, a Guest of our Honored Daimyo, and his Guest, Connor, the Apprentice of the Honored Ancient of the Mountain, have repeatedly asked to be served their breakfast here in the bath." Hanao says in a low but clear voice, speaking Japanese.

Yoake moves over to Hanao in four long strides and slaps her hard in the face. *"Silence! Or you will be washing until it is your time to leave."*

Hanao falls to the floor with a large red mark on her face. She makes no sound and does not look or try to get up.

Connor translates for Mao. *"She was naming polite titles and reminded them we want breakfast, do you want an exact translation?"* Mao gives a tiny headshake, Connor draws a breath to keep a calm voice as he continues. *"The other bitch said "silent or you will be washing until it is your time to leave"*

Before anything else is said or done Mao speaks again, this time with a cold quirk of the mouth. *"I specifically requested a (that title again), with language skills and deep knowledge in etiquette. I will not accept that stupid daughter of a goat."* A gesture at Yoake, the quirk widens to a patronizing smile.

"Neither, do I appreciate that you try to blame your incompetent leadership and greed on someone else." He straightens as his eyes darken and the voice hardens into that of authority. *"If this is the best you can manage. I will have to tell my Honored First Prince, and his Honored First Consort, that I need to relocate."*

I am certain the Honorable Daimyo will be happy to assist. Considering that the Honorable Ancient of the Mountain has asked that his Apprentice will be housed with me until the commission, from the Honorable Daimyo, for my Honored First Prince, is done."

The Elder Priestess is white as snow under the heavy makeup, her eyes flit between Mao and Yoake as if she expects the younger woman to help her. She opens her mouth as if to say something several times, but makes no sound.

Yoake, who looked as if she was to explode when Mao called her daughter of goat, now collects herself, focuses on Mao, and gives a seductive smile. *"I will take good care of you, there is no need to be upset. I will give you a nice massage as you eat your breakfast. Come, let us forget this unpleasant morning."* She removes her clothes as she slowly moves closer.

The deep voice goes straight for Connor's groin, her sensual moves towards Mao make him envious of the other man. Connor feels his breath pick up the pace as he becomes hard, even in the warm water.

She slides off the last of her clothes and kneels next to Mao. *"You will forget we had a disagreement."*

The beautiful rich voice is pulling Connor closer, he straightens and the water around him moves. A soft splash of water and a silent sob from Hanao makes him come back to his mind.

Connor tears his eyes from the woman, looking over at Hanao. She is still lying on the floor looking terrified and ashamed at the same time.

The Elder Priestess is looking at Yoake as if she is a goddess or lover, breathing hard.

Connor takes a firm hold of his mind and body. After all, he has had plenty of practice in the last weeks.

Looking back at Yoake, kneeling next to Mao. Connor can feel the pull of her sensuality, and he is not even the target. Mao has a lecherous smile, grinning right in her face.

She leans closer with a sensuous smile, melodious voice promising. *"Come with me, I will make you forget everything, let us move out of here."*

Mao is licking his lips, lifting his head a little to allow her to kiss him. Moving his right hand behind her neck to pull her closer.

Connor sees a victorious smile on the face of Yoake as she moves in for the kiss.

Mao pulls her down by the neck, soft and slow, with the caress of a lover.

~ 1646 ~

Straight out from him, her face down in the water.

Yoake ends up lying torso and half her thigh in the bath. Knees and rest of the legs remain on the ledge. She is desperately trying to push herself up, but there is nothing to give her

purchase. Mao has a strong grip on her neck and hair, holding her face firmly just under the surface.

Connor shoves himself back, out of the way, when he sees Mao grab his Jian with the left hand.

There is a dark glow in Mao's smile while the woman struggles against the strong grip, desperately and unsuccessfully trying to reach the surface, or turn around. He moves so that he is standing in front of her, the long arm making it impossible for her to reach anything but the hand holding her.

Connor is caught between warring emotions. A pure unbridled urge to ravish the wet struggling naked body, the need to save the helpless woman, and a more detached feeling that she has deserved it.

The Elder Priestess shrieks in Japanese. *"What are you doing! Let her go!"* She throws herself against Mao and Yoake, only to stop at the long sword coming up at her.

Mao gives her a cruel smile. Licks his lips a little looking down at the vainly squirming woman clawing at his hand beneath him. He pushes her deeper under the surface until she lets go of his hand, then he pulls her up again, without letting her break the surface for air.

The cruelty and pure desire, Mao is displaying have Connor feeling nauseated. While the level of skill and confidence he wields the long Jian with, even in his left hand, is chilling.

"Let her go! You cannot do this! This is a Temple, she is a Priestess! Oh, Gods save her. Please, anything. Whatever you wish. Mao Zhu please... anything." The Elder Priestesses angry shouts turn into whimpering pleas as she falls on her knees, looking at the desperate Yoake.

"Honored Guest Mao Zhu. The Elder Priestess begs that you have mercy. She claims she will grant anything." Hanao translates in a shaky voice. *"Please, Honored Sir."* She whispers, having not moved from where she landed after the slap.

Mao wrings the head of Yoake so her mouth breaks the surface. She draws a desperate breath, before she can take a second, he turns the face back down.

Elder Priestess is looking at Hanao in shock, then there is a light in her eyes. *"Honored Sir. I beg of you, can you forgive, let her live. Honorable Mao Zhu, for the light of your spirit, anything within my power I will give."* This time she remembered to speak Chinese.

Yoake is trying to claw at his hand again. With a smirk, Mao twists her so she is rolling over on her back, and pulls her under the surface with her face up this time. She tries to claw at his arm, chest, and face. But goes still when he places the sword over her stomach down between her legs.

"Are you able to bring this bitch to heel?" Mao turns to the Elder Priestess.

"Yes! Yes, Honored Guest Mao Zhu, you will not see her again, she will not cause any more disturbance. My word on it!" She promises.

"No. She will be right here, willing, quiet, and obedient to my smallest wish." Mao raises an eyebrow at the Elder Priestess. *"Can you promise me that?"*

Yoake starts to squirm, in spite of the sword, she is looking more desperate by the second.

"Yes! Anything! Yes, please! Let her breathe. Honored Sir." The Elder Priestess is sobbing.

Mao lifts Yoake over the surface without moving the sword. She is panting desperately, trying hard not to cough.

When she calms down a little Mao looks down at her. *"The old Hag has promised me that if I let you live, you will be my willing plaything. Happy to fulfill my every wish."*

She does not look like she understands what he just said. Frightened eyes flicker as she tries to decipher what is going on, truly afraid for her life now.

"Please, Honored Sir. I only wished to make you happy. Spare me, Honored Master Mao." She starts begging in Japanese, trying to smile at Mao.

Again, Hanao speaks up. She now sits on her knees where she fell, a large red mark on her face where Yoake hit her. The voice is a little less shaky when she says in Japanese.

"Honored Guest Mao Zhu, said that." A nervous glance at the Elder Priestess and Connor, before she turns right to Yoake. *"The hag had promised the Honored Guest Mao Zhu that if the Honored Sir grants you the right to live..."* She waits for Yoake to turn her eyes at her before she continues.

Yoake's eyes flicker to the Elder Priestess, before she looks up at Mao, still holding her just over the surface with the sharp sword, edge first, over her abdomen down between her legs.

She turns to Hanao as if she is a lifeline.

"The Honored Guest Mao Zhu has been promised by the Elder Priestess, that if the Honored Sir grants you the right to live. You will be the willing plaything of Honored Guest Mao Zhu. Happy to fulfill every wish of the Honored Sir." Hanao says, her voice now steady but low. *"I recommend you to be polite and remember to speak a language our Honored Guest understands, Sister. I strongly doubt it to be an empty threat."* Hanao gives Mao a nervous glance as she adds the last.

Then she changes to Chinese, turning to Mao. *"Honored Guest Mao Zhu. Do you wish me to translate my sister's words? The ones said before I could translate your words to her."*

He gives a curt nod.

Hanao recites. *"Please, Honored Sir. I only wished to make you happy. Spare me, Honored Master Mao."*

Mao smirks looking down at the shivering woman under him.

Hanao draws a breath and continues. *"Honored Guest Mao Zhu, other than translating your words to my sister, I took the liberty to say more."*

Mao turns the flint-hard eyes at her, the smirk is still there, he raises one eyebrow at her.

She bows where she sits. *"I said. I recommend you to be polite and remember to speak a language our Honored Guest understands Sister. I strongly doubt it to be an empty threat."*

The smirk of Mao spreads into a large evil grin as he turns back to the terrified, now shaking naked body, in his grasp. *"Will you listen to your wiser sister, my toy?"* He pulls her closer to him still smiling. She now has the edge of the bath at knee level, he uses the sword to indicate a wish for her to spread her legs.

Panting in shallow breaths, eyes huge in fear. Lips are white, the body shivering and tense, but Yoake looks up at him and opens her legs, angling her hips inviting, licking her lips saying in Chinese. *"I will live to give you pleasure, Honored Guest Mao Zhu."*

Mao simply drops her, lifting the sword stepping back. She is not graceful when she scrambles to get out of the water.

He turns to Connor, the hard flint softening slightly, eyes muted to multicolored jade. With a friendly smile, he asks in Gaelic. *"How do you feel about having the breakfast in the heated room, after all? I hate to give in, but I do believe I am quite done bathing for now."*

Connor laughs helplessly, immensely relieved at not being forced to choose right now. To witness or try to stop something he does not wish to live with?

"Aye, that is fine by me." Likely, he will still have to make a decision, but right now he is happy to leave it until after breakfast. He is feeling tired, hungry, and thirsty.

"Hanao. We will have our breakfast in the heated room after all. We both need dry clothes, have Yanagi arrange that and have someone look at your face." Mao's voice softens slightly when he speaks to the kneeling woman.

"Immediately, Honored Sir." Hanao bows and she rise, still holding the folded robe.

Mao steps out of the bath and reaches for one of the towels.

Yoake quickly crawls out of his way, cowering closer to the Elder Priestess.

Mao turns to Connor, who has also stepped out of the water on the other side, and throws the towel at him. *"That one should be dry."* Mao points with his chin at Hanao. Snatching the last towel for himself, placing the Jian on top of the table, he effectively starts to dry himself.

Connor does the same.

Hanao holds out the robe she has managed to keep dry throughout everything. He looks around the room and realizes this is the last dry garment in the room. Yoake having just managed to crawl, still soaking wet, over her own and the robe for Mao that she dropped on the floor earlier.

He accepts the silk robe, taking the opportunity to look closer at the bruised chin. It was no light slap, tomorrow that will be large and ugly, she needs to get it cooled as soon as possible. Maybe the decision will not be that hard after all.

Connor glares at the wet naked woman cowering next to the older woman, who is still kneeling by the bath. Yoake is still shivering, nervously keeping track of the slightest move Mao makes.

The sight calms him, they both look frightened and small.

~ 1646 ~

Mao strikes the gong.

Yanagi enters before the tone has ceased, taking a quick survey of the room with an inscrutable face, he must have been just outside.

"Can I assume the orders for my personal quarters, at least, have not been violated?" Mao asks Yanagi, drying his hair.

A very deep bow. *"Honored Guest Mao Zhu, the Honored Elder Priestess, and Priestess Yoake ordered two younger sisters to set rat traps there."*

Mao freezes for a moment. Then drops the towel, grabs the sword, and disappears out of the bath.

As soon as Mao is out of sight, Yoake snarls, in Japanese. *"Stupid man! They were to set traps, not rummage through the room. You knew that! Damned barbarians."* She grabs her wet clothes and starts to put them on.

Using a mild voice, not looking at Connor, she orders. *"You better get the other lump some dry clothes, and his breakfast."*

Hanao, still helping Connor to dress, stifles a whimper. Looking up at him, scared.

Barbarians? Lump? Connor takes a breath and decides to wait for Mao before taking any action, he just wants to eat. Whatever pity he may have had for the woman is vanishing fast. She either has some strong protection, or she is incredibly stupid.

Speaking Chinese, he turns to Hanao. *"I am sure Yanagi can handle food for me. Hanao, go have that bruise looked at now."*

He turns to Yanagi, who is still absolutely expressionless. *"I am very hungry, if you may, arrange that. So Hanao can leave."*

"Kaga waits to serve in the heated room, Honored Guest Connor." He bows.

Connor picks up his sword, wipes it off with the towel, then leaves the bath and, he fervently hopes, the drama, behind him. For now, at least.

The stomach is growling at him when he enters the large room. The table is set next to the stove like they usually do when bad weather.

He remembers that Kaga speaks no Chinese and smiles at her, speaking Japanese. *"I will eat right away today. I am uncertain of the plans of Honorable Mao Zhu."* Then glances over his shoulder, weary for more drama.

But only Yanagi followed him, he bows and takes his leave as soon as he sees that Kaga has received him.

The food is welcome, the tranquility of the many calm mornings in this room, more so.

Agendas

~ 1646 ~

When the worst hunger is appeased, Connor's mind starts to wander.

He uses meditative techniques to push everything after the Elder Priestess appeared out of his mind, concentrating on the earlier events. Beginning from when he first came here, and that strange urge to fight Mao.

"I was waiting for this. Nakano sent word that he's done with the commission for the Prince, a couple of days ago."

"I'm impressed by your willpower. I thought you would've done this ten days ago."

When I attacked in the bath, he was less surprised than I... Mao purposely joined me in the bath, in order to push me over the edge that I have been walking for days.

"You'll need to ask your Teacher about Imprintings."

"It'll be easier now, we've established hierarchy."

"Do you agree I won this, or do we need to go outside and do it again?"

"Ask Nakano, but remember this was not your fault."

Something about knowing who would take whose head, a ranking, makes the urge. Imprinting? Go away. That he made sure I was convinced means it is not just a philosophical matter.

He also, separately, pointed out that it was not my fault. This is the first time I spend more than a day, or so, in such proximity to an Immortal who is neither my Teacher nor Student.

Somehow the Teacher/Student relationship is at the center of this.

"Just for your information, Nakano asked me to test if you had one specific Imprinting, you did not."

Nakano asked for that. As my Teacher, he can not test it himself? That first morning? There were no problems until we were done with breakfast.

Only some days later the urge came back and did not give away until it came to a full-blown fight. Mao knew exactly what he was doing, using me for his own purposes. There is more than one kind of Imprinting!

"I decided to push further, he won't be pleased with me."

Mao found another Imprinting. One that I have!?

"I give you my word, Nakano will tell you what he knows about Imprintings, which is more than any other immortal currently alive."

"He knows the answers. Well, as much as anyone does at least."

"This way I force his hand a little. I'm not sure he'd choose to tell you."

Connor is remembering that small sly smile of Mao's as he said that.

"I intend to keep quiet and listen to the explanations."

Mao did not hide his manipulation and offered the only payment possible, the knowledge he was after for himself.

There was something in the eyes of Mao when he said Imprintings. Something incredibly hurt, old and tired, but also the touch of a relentless determination.

Connor considers it. To be unknowingly at the mercy of something like that, whatever it is called. Something that makes me act, even think in a way foreign to me. Against my own will, because that was what it did in the end.

I rather know about it, and how to get rid of it... or handle it, if there is no way to lose it.

~ 1646 ~

Connor has been eating and thinking at a leisurely pace. When he is no longer hungry he looks up, half expecting Mao to sit there as usual. But it is still just him and Kaga in the room.

Smiling a little at her, he reaches for some more food. *"I believe I will be ready for tea soon."*

She gives her shy smile. *"Honored Sir, I noticed you finished several of the dishes, will you require more?"*

Connor studies the leftovers. He has eaten most of what would normally amount to a larger than usual breakfast, for the two of them. *"No, thank you, Kaga. But you might want to get some for Mao. I seem to have eaten his as well as my own."*

She bows. *"I will make tea for you and request more food."* Slightly hesitantly she adds. *"Honored Guest Connor, would you like me to comb your hair while you have your tea?"*

She has done that in the evenings, he usually does not get his hair wet in the mornings. Connor has come to enjoy the feeling of her skilled fingers untangling his unruly hair, it is relaxing. *"I would enjoy that, thank you."*

Soon they are joined by two girls, both on the verge of womanhood, and one young man. Connor has seen the girls before, they do menial tasks. Those that do not include directly taking care of guests, he assumes they are in training.

The table is cleared, tea served and stove tended to, in the silent discreet, and effective way Connor has gotten used to. The young man, Connor guesses he is several years older than the girls, serves the tea staying in the corner when they are done.

Kaga exchanges his robe for a thicker and dry one, then adds an extra towel over his shoulders, before she seats herself on a stool behind him. He relaxes into her care, closing his eyes finding a meditative state of no conscious thoughts.

~ 1646 ~

This is disrupted by Mao entering the room.

He moves with authority and presence, in a way Connor has only seen glimpses of before, and there is a burning anger just under the surface. Whatever he found in his room was not to his liking.

Connor starts to get up, but Mao stops him with a gesture.

"No need. We're already almost too late if we want to make it to your teacher's today. Unless he's remade the trail up the mountain, I'd rather not walk it in the dark." He switches from Gaelic to Chinese without pause. *"I will have breakfast before I deal with any more Temple politics."* And back again. *"I've already died falling off that trail once. We can go together tomorrow, or you can go alone today if you rather. I'll have to deal with the stupid hag, and her manipulative Witch lover, before I can go anywhere."* Mao seats himself.

Yanagi starts setting the table and the younger man brings new food trays.

Connor winces at the thought of falling off the steep stony trail. *"Tomorrow's good, I'll do fine without that experience."*

Mao smirks at that. *"Failure to die might be worse. Spending a day on a small cliff in a snowstorm, waiting for most every bone to heal... Only to discover that the only way out of there is falling the rest of the way down."*

"Another thing I'm in no hurry to try." Connor dryly claims.

Mao laughs.

It is not the free open sound of joy that Connor has come to relish. This is darker, with a touch of cruelty, but it is honest none the less. The anger still simmering under the surface, waiting to strike, just as honestly. Connor is immensely glad it is not directed at him.

"Oh? You've got a list of things not to try?" Mao asks with a grin.

"Well, I've heard of a few things I plan to avoid if possible. Some ways to die seems to be high on the list for many of us." No one has ever claimed that failure to die would be worse before. Yet another perspective he has not thought of. But he can easily see how Immortal healing might keep you alive when mortals would die, not always a good thing.

"Burning." Mao shudder. *"Or freezing."*

"Burning I've heard many times before." Connor nods. "Freezing is the first time I've heard. I have been told it is a fairly pleasant way to die if you have to."

Mao is chewing and nods smilingly. *"The dying isn't bad, as deaths go. Unfortunately, they're often coupled with thirst and starvation."* The morbid topic seems to suit his mood. *"If you die just from the cold, the death is fairly painless, almost pleasant, that's true."* He continues with an almost gleeful sneer. *"But you'll pay that back tenfold when you revive, every piece of the body thawing slowly and painfully."*

The voice takes on a hypnotic depth as he gives a description. *"Starting from the chest, slowly, the nerves stab and prickle. Shoulders and hips, the bones will whiter in agonizing ache, creeping out to arms and legs."*

The pain relentlessly increasing, spreading as the cold reluctantly gives way. The thawing flesh will add a new sting, and burn with pulsating twinges of excruciating agony as the Quickening sears through the body, trying to revive the frozen flesh."

Little by little, it'll distribute the torment throughout the entire person. Warmth only hurts more, cold will ease the pain... Until you revive again, just to begin anew."

When most of the body is finally thawed. Then. Last of all. Comes the hands and feet, so many bones that can ache. All those small muscles cramping burning and the endless number of nerves to sting and stab."

It can take up to six days for the pain to cease entirely." Mao cheerfully eats some more.

"I've seen immortals smash their feet to pulp, bite off fingers, even use a rock to pound their balls. Just to escape the pain."

If you ever find someone frozen, put a knife in the heart and don't take it out until the body is completely unfrozen. Or just take the head, before the poor thing revives."

Trying not to shiver, Connor holds out his bowl to get more warm tea. The young man is there immediately. *"It's beginning to be quite a respectable list. Stab, thaw, ^then^ remove the knife. I'll remember that."* He is trying hard not to imagine the experience just described so vividly.

~ 1646 ~

Mao eats some more before he sighs. *"I guess I can't put off politics much longer. What happened after I left the bath?"* He asks, gesturing for Yanagi to empty the table.

Connor ponders what he should say.

He decides on simply telling what happened, and how he interpreted it. *"As soon as you were gone, Yoake said. No, she hissed."* He corrects, trying to remember the exact wording. *"Stupid man. They were to set traps. Not rummage through the room. You know that. Damned barbarians."* He nods, quite certain he got it right. *"I think she meant Yanagi when she said stupid man, but I'm not sure."*

Kaga has, after being done with Connor's hair, continued to gently massage his neck and shoulders using the same oil she uses to untangle his hair. When he mentions Yoake and Yanagi she stiffens, her hands becoming more careful.

Yanagi almost flinched when Yoake was mentioned.

Connor considers stopping using names, but chooses not to, it is quite obvious what they are talking about anyway. *"Then Yoake put on her wet clothes and insulted me some more in a mild voice, not looking at me. This time she said: You better get the other lump some dry clothes and his breakfast."*

Connor looks at Mao, he shows nothing just nod. *"I was hungry and uncertain how to handle it, so I decided to not. In Chinese, I told Hanao that Yanagi would have to take care of me and told her to get the bruise looked at."*

"Then I told Yanagi to arrange breakfast for me. He's really good at not giving any emotions and being correct. I took my sword and came here to eat and escape the drama."

"Do I understand correctly, that you concede the right for complaint, to me?" Mao is incredulous. The eyes, having never quite lost the stone-hard edge, demands an explanation.

"Well..."

I could say that Nakano specifically told me to stay out of politics. It would be the truth. But I did not think of that at the time." Connor hesitates before continuing, he meets Mao's eyes, still trying to sort what actually happened. *"I could say that none of the insults were directed at me, I was just a lump in the corner with ears. But I did take offense."* He explains as he realizes where a large part of his confidence was lost. *"In all honesty. I was just hungry tired confused and... not trusting my feelings."*

"Ah." A deep nod, close to a bow. *"Please, forgive me. You've had a rough morning indeed."* Earnestly Mao starts to count on his fingers.

"The Imprinting playing havoc with your mind, not a good start of the day." One.

"I broke your arm, draining and not confidence building." Two.

"Then I run a sword through you. I'd say you had every right to be famished." Three.

"That last attack of yours, the level of Strength used must've been a drain for someone as young as you." Four.

"After all that. You still broke the Spell of that witch, again impressing me with your willpower." Mao holds up a full hand, looking at Connor with a 'did I miss something' face.

Connor shakes his head, that was a good recap of the disastrous morning. *"Did you say Witch and Spell? The bitch is a Witch?"* He almost wishes he had a harder time believing it, or that he was more surprised.

It makes sense of the whole bath debacle, putting the strange behavior of the Elder Priestess in a different light. But it complicates matters, does it not? Connor has no idea what the local customs for witches are.

He does know that Nakano is openly practicing magic, and not hiding his Immortality. Having lived here for generations. *"How does that affect matters? Will it be a problem for..."* Connor decides it may be a good time to go back to not using names. *"my Teacher. I've no idea about local customs or laws in this."*

He also belatedly remembers that Mao is not local, he does not even speak the language, and might not have any more idea than Connor. Or Mao might not ^{care} how it affects Nakano, Connor has very little knowledge about their relation.

"It's not good." An annoyed gesture from Mao has Yanagi coming close to running for the tea. *"Why would I care if the Elder Priestess was under a spell? I never thought that a Priestess would be stupid enough to play Temple politics in front of Guests."*

He gives a contemptuous snort. *"Not when there's a local religious war brewing, and this could play right in the hands of the Christian group. They're working hard to make any mysticism appear dishonorable, the stupid bitch certainly makes it easy for them."*

A sour face. *"It's a political game of saving face, played at the highest levels of society. The oldest official son of the local Lord is smack in the middle of it all. So is the Lord's first mistresses, who just happens to have a son in the same age."*

He raises a sarcastic eyebrow at that. *"I'm sure religious zeal is the reason for all their actions."* He claims with desert-dry irony.

Mao has a detached look as if he is reading something. *"As a firm 'long term' political force, in favor of the current local Lord and his 'religious policy', your Teacher makes a prime target for the Christians. They're already trying to oust him, as either a fraud or a Warlock."* Mao sips some tea, calmly meeting the eyes of Connor before continuing. *"If they succeed, in either, he'll have to flee. If they manage to discredit the local Lord sufficiently, same result."*

"Holy Ch...crap." Connor stops himself, swearing by God is not appropriate, not at this time and place.

With a sarcastic grin and a shrug Mao drinks some more tea. *"My Prince has been trying hard to stay out of the local political infighting. Unfortunately, this was an insult at my Prince, it can't be ignored, not when there are witnesses."* The gleaming green flint eyes narrow. *"Had it been just you, it could've been contained. But both Hanao and Yanagi saw and heard some of it, and probably the young man and some of the girls, as well. The walls are too damned thin."*

Mao spread his hands inviting. *"If you can find a way to deal with this, one that doesn't include killing everyone who was within the temple walls at the time. I'll happily take it."* The toneless voice makes it clear that he will do just that if no other solution is found.

"It's not good?" Connor incredulously repeats Mao's starting point. "I don't want to know what you would describe as bad."

"It's not the worst that could happen."

A thin smile as he holds up a finger. *"For one, there's no immortal in our opposition, making it highly likely that we get out of this alive, even if we have to run for it."*

He looks thoughtfully at his second finger. *"I'm still nourishing a hope that the other Elder Sisters will want to handle this as quietly and discreetly as possible."*

A third finger joins the first two. *"Hopefully the local Lord will listen to your teacher, we just have to figure what to say."*

The fourth finger unfolds with a tight somewhat bitter smile. *"Last but not least, my Prince will probably take my advice on how to handle it."*

Mao signals for more tea, Connor holds out his bowl for more as well.

~ 1646 ~

Yanagi does not let the younger man serve the tea, making him refill the stove instead. Serving the tea himself, the body language is much more careful than anything displayed before. Deliberate, respectful, and properly submissive. When the tea is served he stays seated on his knees bowing head to the floor, waiting.

Mao glares at the kneeling man with narrowed eyes, then he sighs and speaks in Chinese. *"I will let you know when we are ready for them, you may leave the room to make sure they understand."*

"Introduce the young man, we will need nothing but warmth and tea for now. I need no language for that, and my guest, Connor, can translate if necessary."

"Yes, Honored Sir." Yanagi sits up and waves at the younger man to come.

He changes to Japanese. *"The Honored Guest Mao Zhu and his Guest the Honorable Connor, Apprentice of The Ancient on the Mountain, will be in your care while I report to the Elder Sisters."*

The young man seems terrified at this responsibility.

"The Honored Sir states he will need nothing but tea and warmth in my absence. If there is great need, Honored Guest Connor may translate. Ask Kaga if you are uncertain of something." Yanagi continues.

At the last sentence, Connor felt the soft hands working his stiff shoulders tense. Surprised Kaga drew a silent breath.

The young man, however, seems relieved. He bows at Mao. *"Honored Guest Mao Zhu, I am Buna, it is an honor to serve."* Yanagi translates.

Mao nods at both of them, makes a dismissive gesture, then turns back to Connor. *"So, what do you require to appease your honor?"*

"Me?" Connor is astonished. *"Didn't we just agree that I'm the least important in this whole mess?"*

"Where did you get that idea?" Mao frowns, his eyes pin Connor. *"Have you felt insulted by any one of the Temple today? Or any other day, for that matter?"*

"Not before today, they have been very pleasant to me. Until the Witch decided to treat me as furniture, unwanted furniture." Connor does not want another fight with Mao, not if honesty is all that is required to avoid it. *"If the old woman was under a spell then I can understand that she forgot, or were unable to think of, that she greeted me in Japanese when I arrived. At the time I was insulted by it."*

"I've already claimed the Witch as my prize for talking to the Elder Sisters." Mao gives a lazy mean smile. *"If you want a piece of her, I would be happy to let you."*

Connor shudders as he remembers the feelings he had in the bath, to be caught between those strong warring emotions.

That pure unbridled urge to ravish the struggling naked body. He grows hard at the memory of the soft rounded hips squirming, muscles ripping and shivering in the warm water. A flash of the hips tilting up invitingly with Mao's long Jian sword lying flat against the inside of a smooth thigh.

That other feeling, the need to save a helpless woman, a feeling that cooled him at the time. Now, it is mostly making him feel sick of himself, how could...how can he desire that fear and helpless despair? Did he? Does he? Imprinting? Spell?

Recalling the feel of water moving, Hanao sobbing, breaking... something, a spell?

He compares it to the urge to fight. When he looks back he can feel the difference. One came from within, the other pushed on him from the outside, different yet not. Both were making him react in ways he does not recognize, or like, in himself.

Yoake had laid a spell, not directed at him but strong enough to make him desire her. At the time he had felt envy that she was concentrating on Mao.

He broke the spell, he is certain of that. So, when Mao pulled her into the water the desire and some of the envy remained, but not the spell.

The third feeling was a detached thought that she had deserved it. Some part of his mind knew what was happening. Relief fills Connor, his instincts, and at least a part of his mind, were not affected. This means he can learn the difference, to trust his feelings.

This however also means that the anger at being ignored is his own. The desire for the body a residue, but for revenge was his alone. Not coming from someone or something else. This he will have to live with.

Considering the offer Mao made again. With his feelings and reactions sorted, the mere thought of that Witch touching him is making Connor shiver in revulsion.

Mao said he claimed her. He made her promise to obey any and every whim of his. The various occasions Mao has displayed mean wicked and bloodthirsty leaves Connor with no doubt that she will regret having crossed him for the rest of her life.

And even more, if she fails to keep her promise. Knowing he is unable to stop Mao, he considers if he can live with it, letting a helpless woman be used and hurt...

Yoake was ^not^ innocent, or helpless. She used magic to challenge Mao, and she lost. Arrogant and stupid, had she handled it skillfully Connor thinks it is likely that Mao had let it go.

It is certainly more deserved than most slaves. He knows they are usually captured and entirely innocent, or born into it. He has not had any problems living with that, so why would this be different?

He will not touch the Witch, nor interfere, he rather not be there if he has the choice. He feels calm, having made the decision Connor looks up.

Mao has had a refill of tea, is sipping it calmly waiting for him to gather his thoughts.

That strange man has had him thinking and realizing more things in these couple of weeks than both his Teachers have in their combined three years.

Out of habit, he tries to stop the thought, but that strange urge to fight is nowhere in sight. For the first time, he is able to explore why he wants Mao as a teacher. Why Mao inspires thought and self-knowledge in a way none of the others have.

Ramirez forced him to think, rather than react. Without those lessons he would not be able to... If Ramirez had lived, maybe later this could have happened? Ramirez and Mao have many similarities. Including the ability to be beyond irritating.

Connor chuckles to himself, he will have to try harder to get the story of their first meeting. Mao has been unwilling to disclose it, despite several attempts from Connor.

Nakano is trying to teach him perspective and patience. Neither of those things comes easily for Connor, that is why it feels like he is getting nowhere. But the meditation and basic realization that there are other perspectives, has helped him immensely these weeks.

Is it so simple that he was ready for these insights, and that is why he takes to the “not-lessons” of Mao so... Well, easily is not the right word... Maybe quickly is closer?

Mao has at no point claimed he has nothing to teach. He only insists that he is not Connor's Teacher.

For now, I will have to be content with the “not-lessons”. And if Mao uses me to further his knowledge about Immortality? I will not complain, just remember. For now. See that? I am practicing the habit of thinking...

One day I will think of a way to persuade you to be my Teacher, Mao Zhu.

Until then I will collect what favors I can...

~ 1986 Walking the streets of New York ~

Streets of New York

~ 1986 ~

The Gathering had felt like the urge, the Imprinting. When over, the peace was the same as when Connor yielded in that stone circle; that is why it had felt so familiar.

Content with having solved one mystery, Connor turns to the next.

The Gathering is Called by an Immortal?

Well, Mao had been right about Imprintings. Nakano spent weeks explaining and answering questions when we finally got the time to ask him.

And Mao is old enough to know things forgotten by others. Nakano was more than willing to gossip, once Mao had left the area.

Connor glances at Mao, “Methos”, Ben now, walking next to him. Thinking Ben must have paused almost mid-sentence to give him the time to remember and think.

At that glance, Ben continues where he stopped. *"Those who are taught in the Old Ways try to help each other when it comes to finding and continuing the traditions with our students. It's increasingly rare that an immortal survives their first five centuries."*

This means that if you wish, I'm offering to take you on as my Student."

He quickly adds. *"There's no hurry, you don't have to decide anything now. You have won the prize, enjoy it!"*

I will leave you with a possibility to contact me. When your woman has died of old age and you are about to get dragged back to the cursed Game again. I'll be happy to show you a few new tricks."

The two men walk in silence, for a while.

"That's a lot to take in." Connor finally says.

Ben nods but says nothing, just keeps walking.

"So... the dream I had after the Quickenings, it tells what the prize is. And I feel like a Pre-Immortal to others, for now. This will last for a lifetime. How long is a lifetime anyways?" Connor recaps the prize part of what was said. Has to start somewhere right?

Ben nods. *"A lifetime is somewhere between sixty and hundred twenty years. I don't know exactly what the factors that decide this are, but the power of the Caller and the amount of Challenges in the Gathering, are parts of it."*

Was there any mystic Power in your dream?"

"Um, yes... Some kind of... feeling all humans... it's the only part of the dream that's not clear anymore. Important why?" Connor replies a little more wavering than usual, only the last part is in his usual coarse way.

"Probably not more than a century then, and you'll likely gain that power over time. It's not unusual for the winner to gain some mystic power. Especially if he's close to, or has just passed into a new Age. It seems to somehow use some of the power from the Prize, however."

"Other than the plain being Immortal, I've had no mystic powers before. How will it work?" Connor grunts, not sure he likes this.

For the first time since he started talking Ben looks at Connor, there is a small smile and some golden sparks in his eyes. *"Actually, yes you have."*

Ramirez and later Nakano's training will have given you some control over your Quickenings that most modern immortals don't have.

Also, Ramirez discovered that you were 'water born' and showed you how useful that may be. You must've discovered that most immortals can't breathe underwater like you? They drown and revive." He raises an inquiring eyebrow at Connor.

Connor stops abruptly. Standing block still staring at nothing, no expression on his face.

Ben patiently stands next to him, only moving to let a woman with her dog pass.

"I'll be damned, never thought about it before. You're right of course, and I never pushed Duncan in the lake, like Ramirez did me..." Connor resumes the walking pace they have been using so far. *"Would he have learned that skill if I had?"* He asks. Thinking that he has possibly done Duncan and Antonio a great disservice, by not finding them a better teacher, or at least just doing it exactly like it had been done to him.

Connor follows Ramirez's old friend. His own friend and/or maybe Teacher? He still cannot quite believe what the old Immortal is offering. For centuries he has plotted, and now an offer...

"No. He would most likely either have swum or drowned. It's not a Skill it's a Power. Just to find a Student's first inborn Power is something that takes years of skill and training to learn. To bring it out is usually a lot easier, just rock the boat!"

Ben grins at Connor, who grins back.

"But if you have made a mistake, the trust between Teacher and Student will be forever damaged. Imagine if you would've drowned a hundred times on the way to shore..."

Connor shudders at the thought, it would certainly have made trust in Ramirez hard after that, as it was it strengthen his trust immensely.

"It's better to not risk it. To let the Students find it for themselves, rather than making the wrong move. As I've said before, there are very few left who even knows to look for an inborn Power, and even less who can actually find it. It gives great promise for any future Students"

you might take, that you instinctively did not do something that would probably not have worked."

"Likely? Probably?" Connor asks, pouncing on the qualifiers.

"I don't know your Duncan. It's theoretically possible that he has the same inborn Power. But to be Water-borne is a rare Power. Two of those, with less than a century in between them, are highly unlikely. Especially considering you are from the same area."

"I see.." They walk in silence for a while.

~ 1986 ~

"You say you would be willing to teach me. What would that mean practically?" Connor is actively pushing for eye contact, Challenging for the first time this evening.

Ben meets his eyes with a frank openness. They are black and gold under the dim streetlights.

Connor feels a slight chill as the age and experience behind those eyes' studies him with a... not cold, more like... detached, calculation. For the first time in his life, Connor surrenders without a fight. With a shiver, he lowers his eyes.

"Do not challenge him."

Nakano's voice echoes in the back of his head. Too late. It takes him several steps to regroup.

He finds himself half a step behind the taller man, who is again looking forward rather than at him. Connor takes a breath, square his shoulders, and step up next to Ben again. Looking at him from the side, rather than straight up.

The mouth bends up in a smirk, he returns Connor's glance, and the smirk breaks out to a full-on smile, golden eyes glittering. *"How about you buy me a beer?"* Ben stops in front of a bar.

"Sure, of course!" Connor laughs. *"The honor is mine."*

Without a thought he steps through the door that Ben is holding for him, trusting him to watch both their backs.

Searching the bar for a good place to sit he feels Ben brush past him, a hand on his shoulder. Connor hands him his wallet and goes for a small two-person table in the corner.

When he places his coat by the chair with the back to the bar, he clearly realizes how large an impact his surrender had on him.

Is this a man he could follow into war? Trust to watch his back and respect, even while knowing that if necessary he could, and would, be sacrificed. Yes, his instincts whisper. But not lightly and not without cause.

Shaken Connor tries to argue with his instincts while he watches the older Immortal flirt with the bartender. The feeling of safety that settles when Ben seats himself in the corner and slides over his wallet, is the final nail for Connor.

They sip their beers for a while.

"Practically huh? Okay, we keep in touch. You enjoy your Prize and I live out the usefulness of my current identity. When you feel it's time to move on, we sit down to discuss what you want to gain from this."

Ben shrugs casually and goes on. *"Things for you to think on until then. Do you want to be a player of The Game full-time? Do you want to learn more about the Old Ways? Do you have any other goals of your own?"*

Depending on what you want, we're talking about a time-span of five years up to a century, and anything in between. I'm not impossible, but I ^ will ^ require that any promises made are respected."

"What is in this for you? From where I sit it seems like no gain for you, just work..." Connor wonders if this old creature knows that he has wished this from their first meeting. That he was prepared to sell his soul to him for this opportunity. Or maybe he already has...

The old Immortal stares into his beer for a while. *"I made a promise to a friend. I don't make promises lightly, but I keep the ones I make."* Ben is suddenly looking vulnerable, lonely and sad. *"Ramirez was a good friend. I want his last student to be all that he can be."* He drinks some beer and adds quietly, almost too low to be heard. *"I also want the knowledge to survive, so much is lost. I want to try to save what can be saved."*

"If you will take me, I would be honored to be your student." Connor raises his glass in salute.

Ben chuckles. *"Trust me, that'll pass in less than a week."* He smiles and raises his glass.

"I believe you, Ben. But it can't be worse than hiding behind the bathtub when you have sex in it." Connor grunts, unable to hold back a small smile at the memory. He had decidedly not found it funny in any way at the time.

He is rewarded with a giggling snort, as Ben spurts beer through his nose and then the free laugh he remembers from Mao Zhu.

"I would've invited you! Had it not been for the fact that you emphatically claimed to not be interested in males. Oh, and the small detail of how to explain why you were in the castle at all, of course!"

They happily reminisce and have more beers. The bartender serves them at the table, she is trying to get Ben to ask for her number.

They tell each other of conquests of the opposite sex, and Ben of some of the same sex. Connor speaks of Brenda, and then of Rachel. Ben of his latest wife.

Connor tells of his, and some of Duncan's or Antonio's, adventures.

Ben asks about Antonio. Connor laughingly tells him about his latest student, and how he consistently refuses Duncan's attempts to protect him. Confusing his protective older Student to no end.

They laugh as Ben tells Connor about Darius' latest attempt at wine, exchange information and gossip on enemies, and send greetings to common friends.

Ben tells some more about the politics and scandals in the late years of Ming, and the early years of the Qing Dynasty. Connor remembers to thank him for the investment tips.

~ 1986 ~

By the time the bar closes; they have had many laughs and large amounts of beer and scotch.

Outside the bar, Connor is reminded of the present time. *"Is this how it'll be, to be taught by you?"*

Your insight freely given in some things on one hand, and no chance, or sometimes even forbidden to ask things you don't want to answer, on the other? It's not the first time you've done so, to me or others..."

"Have you changed your mind already, Connor?" The tone is light, like a joke. But Ben is looking straight forward not at Connor, there is a chilling smoothness in his moves.

Connor is confused by the sudden change. Then he rethinks and realizes how that comment could sound as if he had changed his mind, or even judgmental. Still, Mao would not have reacted this way, would he? But then he was nothing to Mao. A mere child, a student of a friend. Or maybe of two friends, as it turned out. Both now long dead.

The sadness and vulnerability when they were talking about why he offered to take on Connor as a Student comes to mind. It is clear to Connor if he turns Mao. No, Ben. Down now, there will be no second offer.

Still, he walks by Connor's side, letting him think and come to his own conclusions in his own time. Just like every other time they have crossed paths.

Then it hits him like a club in the head, it has been 300 years, that is a lot of time. Their short encounters in between do not really count. He has made the assumption that Ben is the same as Mao was. Yet the one lesson Mao had officially given was about change.

He had pointed out the fact that he will be what he can be, within the sentiment of the current era. Ben would not assume that Connor has not changed. Connor should not make assumptions of what, who Ben is now.

Connor thinks of an answer and smiles. Challenge, after all, needs to be answered with Challenge. *"So far both my Teachers have driven me to new levels of frustration and insanity in their own unique ways. I was hoping to get a head-start in learning to handle it, this time."*

Ben laughs before he throws a shrewd look at Connor. *"Damned! You figured it out. Guess I have to come up with another way to drive you insane."* There is a large happy smile on his

face.

Another stark realization hits Connor. Not only was the older man ready to walk away if he had turned him down, he had almost expected Connor to change his mind. He truly has no idea how much Connor wants this.

"You know I meant it." Connor grunts. He hates to be this vulnerable.

"Meant what, exactly?" There is only question, no comprehension, in Ben's face.

Damn! Will I have to spell it out for him? How can a man who sometimes seems to read my mind be so dense? *I would see it as a great honor if you are willing to take on the responsibility of Teaching me. I know you don't do promises lightly.* A deep breath for courage. *"I trust you will push me in the lake, if necessary."*

Ben stares at him with an expressionless face, even the eyes are just eyes. *"And if you drown a hundred times on the way to shore?"* Cold, cold voice.

"Then I assume that the lesson is that I need to learn how to swim."

"Or that I was just plain wrong."

"Well, then I still need to learn how to swim, don't I?"

Ben's laugh is more a surprised bark than anything else. *"You were right, you know that don't you?"*

"About swimming? Yes, I know." Connor is almost sure that Ben changed the subject. But he is not sure what the new, or old one, is.

However, his joke is rewarded with a true laugh from the man. Not quite the same as the one of Mao, but real anyway. Somehow Connor can feel when that laughter is true, it seems to come in a million shapes, but still true.

Then in a toneless voice, Ben says. *"No. That I will manipulate you, and anyone or everyone else, into making or doing what I want, if it is necessary."*

Damned, we are really going for honest this time. *"Aye, I know. I figured that the last time we met, if not before."* However, I believe "necessary" is the keyword, Connor adds silently to himself.

"Is that what you want to learn?" Ben just keeps walking, waiting for his response.

"Do I want to be able to fit anywhere, any time? To get along with just about anyone? Well of course I do! Do I understand how it can be used and misused? I strongly doubt it. Do I believe it is anything more than plain experience to it? Not a clue!" A deep breath, for God's sake I better stop rambling! If ^I^ don't know what I'm talking about, how could he?

"I will be proud to learn whatever you want to teach." Connor finally admits.

"You would trust me like that? Why?" A low voice, dark eyes searching Connor's face.

"Why not? Because you offered. I'm curious. All knowledge is good knowledge. I want the Powers. Pick your choice, none of them is a lie." Connor refuses to look away, he lets the ancient Immortal search him for whatever answers he may find.

Ben steps up in front of him, forcing him to stop and look up at him. They are close, almost touching. Ben moves one ungloved hand up to his cheek.

Connor freezes but does not move away.

The impish grin is so like the one Mao had the first time that Connor is almost startled by the knitted cap, rather than the shaved forehead.

This time Ben puts his entire hand on Connor's cheek and traces the jawline as he draws it back. *"Unique."* And keep walking as if it had not happened.

Connor is stunned, then he starts thinking. What if he wants me to... please... him? Can I do that? Will I? Can I deny him as his Student? Having learned what he could about history, after leaving the east, he knows that in most of history that would have been expected of him as an Apprentice or Student.

Connor, having never felt any attraction to a man in any way. Has learned to take a compliment and is no longer bothered or embarrassed by others doing what they want, as long as they all agree. This, in no way, includes him touching or being touched by another male.

He can not help to be a bit amused by himself. just a few hours. Hell! Minutes! Ago, he was ready to sell his soul for this, but apparently not his body...

Ben did say he would not be impossible. Connor just hopes that his "I will be proud to learn whatever you want to teach." Was not taken as a promise, not for that.

One night and I learn more about myself than I have in the last 300 years. Again. Wonder if I can handle several years of this? Connor reflects. He looks back at Ben, ready to take the bull by the horns.

He is met by an amused smile in glittering eyes. *"Don't worry I won't force myself on you. That's not socially acceptable in these days, remember?"*

Relief floods Connor, but he cannot help to disagree. *"That would depend on where in the world you are, doesn't it?"*

Ben's laugh comes as a cleansing. *"That is true enough, but I am a highly 'civilized' welsh lad now."*

"Aye, am I glad to hear that, lad!" Connor laughs with him.

They walk awhile in comradely silence before the elder Immortal speaks again.

"Some of the things I've told you tonight are things that are almost forgotten to the world.

That a Gathering is Called by an immortal is known only to a few.

The early history of immortals is known by a few more, and in bits and pieces by a fair number.

The concept of Ages, rather than years or..." A contemptuous snort. "heads taken, is almost entirely lost and with it the knowledge of Powers.

Still nothing of what I've told you would change anything, even if you shouted it to the world. Or told every immortal you meet, of it.

If I were to answer all your questions this may no longer be the case."

"You don't think knowing that a Gathering is Called by an immortal will change anything?" Connor finds that hard to believe. It changes everything as far as he is concerned.

"It was common knowledge when The Game was born, did not help. Also, almost no one today will believe you. Maybe Duncan or Antonio, they are your Students after all. But who else?"

"So prove it to them! You could Call and they would ^have^ to believe it." Connor wants others to understand this, to stop The Game.

"Are you stupid!? I thought you said you did ^not^ like bloodthirsty maniacs!" Ben almost spits at him. "If the goal was to kill everyone, I would not need to Call them. Have I somehow given you the impression that I ^want^ to fight and kill more immortals? What part of the Caller ^has^ to participate did you not understand? Or the "everyone ^younger^" than the Caller?

Or did Nakano for once failed to share that particular piece of gossip about me? If he did, I'm sure Darius or someone else did." A cynical eyebrow lifted at Connor.

"Go find some stupid two millennia-old believer of The Game, and talk ^him^ into suicide! Only ^one^ of your witnesses will survive to tell the world, remember? How exactly will that ^change^ anything?" The last part is fairly dripping with biting sarcasm. Emphasized by an exhausted two-handed gesture.

Connor cannot remember that he has felt this stupid and embarrassed, or been so thoroughly, rightfully, chastised in his life.

He feels like a 5-year-old trying to argue... Actually, he ^is^ a 5-year-old trying to argue with a 50-year-old. Still blushing he snorts and laughs at himself.

Ben looks at him questioning.

"I'm a five-year-old kid, trying to convince his fifty-year-old father that Santa Claus gave him the presents the father bought."

Ben chuckles at this, then says in a deeply insincere voice. *"I'm so sorry to destroy your illusions my son, but Santa Claus is not real."*

"If I'm not old enough to stop believing in Santa at four hundred fifty, then I'll never be. I'm the one who is sorry. I did not think, nor did I listen."

The Elder Immortal nod at this. *"One thing to remember.*

I may be the fifty-year-old father, but that does not mean I'm always right. Or that I know everything. Yes, I'm older. That means I've had more time to make mistakes, and trust me when I say I've done a lot of those."

"Yes, that's why I'm glad you are willing to take me on. Most of the other really old ones left, sit on their Holy Ground and survives. You live, this is what I hope to learn."

Ben nods again. *"I'll try to live up to that."* Then he winks at Connor. *"Oh, and the five-year-old analogy is quite accurate... when you are ten, you get to walk to and from school alone, and at twenty you get to call yourself Adult."* Ben explains with a wicked grin.

They both laugh.

He remembered Connor notices. I asked when I will not be young anymore, and now he told me, just 1500 years to go...

"So... the mortals following me?" Connor hopes he is not in for another hard lesson for asking this, after having been warned not to ask questions.

"Not a danger to you. Let me know if they change patterns, or behavior, otherwise ignore them. Don't let them know you seen them, and don't talk about them with others." A curt order, no explanation.

Okay, so he did not get the head cut off, but this is not a subject to push. Connor curbs his curiosity. *"Yes, sir."* He agrees quietly.

"Good. Was that all?" Ben is all business now.

Connor swallows, suddenly nervous. *"Was it the Kurgan who Called this Gathering?"*

"You caught that huh? Yes, I've been hunting him, we fought twice. Both times we were interrupted, both times he ran rather than stay and fight me again. When I managed to trace him here, he had already made the Call before I caught up to him." Ben explains in a toneless voice.

"So if you had killed him right then. Would the Gathering not have stopped?"

"No. Once the Call is made, the Gathering continues until there is one Winner, who receives the Prize."

"So if you had killed Kurgan, after he made the Call, you would have been forced..."

"To kill the rest of you too? Yes." Still the same toneless voice.

"So, you gave up your vengeance, to save ^one^ unknown Immortal?" Connor does not think he would have cared about that. Had it been all of them? Yes. But just the one winner? No.

"No. I postponed it until the Gathering was over. Had he won, I would have taken my revenge on my own. Now, I'm just as happy that he is gone anyway, and me not having to do the dirty job." Ben shrugs indifferently.

Connor realizes that Ben is a lot less bloodthirsty than Mao was, more sensitive too.

They turn around a corner and are met by the first rays of the morning sun.

"Time's up, I need to get going." Ben hands Connor a slip of paper.

It contains the name Adam Pierson and the text Archeological Discoveries. Two phone numbers, one postbox address in Paris France, and a second in Dolgellau Wales.

"The first number is my current home number, it's for emergencies only. Don't leave messages or talk to anyone but me on that one. If someone else answers, you are selling a one-year subscription to Archeological Discoveries."

The Paris postbox is not to be used unless otherwise specified.

At the other number, you can leave a message. I will check it once a week.

To the Dolgellau postbox address, you can send closed envelopes, it will be checked once a month.

I will contact you if anything changes from that.

You better destroy that paper as soon as possible. Any questions?"

"What the hell are you into?" Slips Connor, before he catches himself. *"No questions, thank you. I will send my new address to the Dolgellau postbox in a closed envelope as soon as I have one."*

A smile and a nod. *"Good!"*

I would appreciate it if the name Adam and the hunting Kurgan part never associate, that would be helpful. I suppose you have to tell your women something? Can you say you met an old friend named Mau Zhu?"

Connor nods, it is the truth, just not the whole truth. He waits to see if there is anything else, thinking he will have to research this Adam Pierson.

"No, you ^will not^ call your detectives to find out more about Adam. As a matter of fact, you are not going to look the name up at all. I have put way too much work into this identity for

you to ruin it on mere curiosity." There is a finality to that statement that reminds Connor of the offhand. "To kill the rest of you too? Yes." Remark earlier. And the not-so-offhand, "don't ask" warning.

The man ^can^ read minds damn him! *"Aye, Sir."* What else is there to say.

"You take care, and don't be in any hurry, enjoy the prize as you can."

A relaxed friendly smile when Ben holds his hand out.

Connor takes it in a warrior's grip and smiles back. *"I will, you be careful, don't lose your head."*

They part ways in the morning sun.

~ The Beginning ~

End Notes

I have made one major change from cannon. The year Connor was at Nakano.

The movie universe and the series are not entirely compatible anyway and i wanted Connor to meet Nakano (and Methos) after Teaching Duncan.

There is a convenient hole in Connor's time line around 1650s and Methos was supposed to be in China around that time.

It also gave me the opportunity to add a couple of years to Connor's time with Nakano.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!