**Russian Roulette: Second Chamber**

by **Vixen_Tail**

**Summary**

Part 2 of 2. No one ever said an SI gets a place in canon events, or that they would be ideally placed at all. How much would you recall if you had decades to go before anything in a long forgotten story comes to be? AU, Thief!SI/OC, Pre!Fated Day Arcobaleno, very Pre!Canon

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes
"The militsiya have been in and out all last week, asking questions." Galina informed Sonya very pointedly as she handed over more than enough work to keep the woman in question in her seat for at least several hours on end, not really gaining any recognition aside a smoky huff. "They were equally as interested as everyone else where the hell our founder and principal was."

"I have no control over Viper. There was a long-standing trade set up, in order for Bjørn to be taught to handle money. The fact it finally happened is not my fault, take it up with them."

The Lightning took in a deep breath, ignoring the ribbons of ashy smoke from their boss' chain smoking as she tried and pretty much failed to make a measurable dent into a year's worth of paperwork for a fully functioning school in as few hours as possible. Apparently it didn't help the brunette much, given the immediate pinching of the bridge of her nose going on over there.

Peter 'Scruffy' McScruffy, otherwise known as Bordrov Jaroslav the basic science teacher locally, fidgeted with a somewhat more battered sketchbook than it had been when he received it from the diligently working thief. Turning to the eagle-eyed Storm user that showed up with their boss in a flair of Mist Flames right on the school's main steps two days ago and had been hanging around in the background ever since, the Sun tried for a friendly smile even if he really didn't feel it. "I don't think I got your name...?"

"Don't have one."

…that wasn't Russian. It wasn't English either. In fact, that sounded as some rather accented French he didn't actually know many words of was being spoken to him.

He, and probably everyone else in the room who might not know a lot of French, understood it perfectly fine because the Mists got tired of being called in to solve issues with heavy accents or mistranslations for the Chinese students. Through the Mist Flames they were supplying to enable free-exchange of information in spite of linguistic barriers while anyone was speaking anything within school grounds, it was really hard to tell to be sure what language anyone was really speaking to you.

"Um... do you mean you don't have one as in there's no need to give a name, or as in you can't remember your name?" Questioned the still somewhat thin Sun hesitantly.

The Storm, slowly and so the Storm-Cloud was fully aware of his motions, reached over and stole one of the cigarettes out of the pack set next to an ashtray and very carefully lit it the same way their boss did. "Don't remember it. The little lady and the Mist she was working with both claimed I did it to myself, so... yeah."

"...did what to yourself?"

"He asked a cabal of Mists to erase him. He means he doesn't remember anything. Who he was, where he was from, no one and nothing has anything on him. He's a blank slate. But," slamming an apparently empty pen into the wood of her desk, the second pen she wrote out of ink so far, Sonya glanced backwards to the two men with a frown, "apparently, he has just enough personality left to be a colossal pain in my ass."
"Technically, I suppose… I got what I wanted." Allowed the man, who had the good genetics to make guessing his age rather difficult but seemed a lot younger than him… or it was the inability to recognize anything as more than 'oh, that. I know that' making him seem younger than he was. "No past, only the present."

The thief they were speaking to was unamused. "Right… I'm sure whatever or whoever you were would delight in the fact you picked to follow the first person you saw once you woke up."

"It was you or that insane Mist you were working with." Pointed out the Storm logically around his stolen cigarette filter. "Pretty sure, no matter who I was, I'd appreciate not being used like a pawn by a fucking Mist for whatever he wanted the whole outfit for."

She just shot him a dirty look, before reluctantly going back to her mountainous paperwork when the Lightning found her a new pen and planted it directly on top of the waiting papers.

"Speaking as the last member of her staff to come without a name," Scruffy volunteered when it became apparent that part of the conversation was over, "you might want to pick one yourself. Otherwise you'll end up with something… 'descriptive'."

"In all fairness…" Chipped in the brunette woman, waving a finger at him admonishingly. "You were a little worse for wear when the boss lady dragged you home, 'Scruffy'."

"Anything's better than being known as Scruffy." Peter refuted with good humor, running a hand over his silver-touched close shorn curls.

"Like, say… 'Peter McScruffy'?"

Snorting a barked laugh he hadn't expected, the Storm fumbled his cigarette and nearly dropped the burning roll of tobacco into his own beaten looking duster's front pockets. "Is that really your name?"

"It is now."

"If the lot of you are not going to help, get the fuck out of my office." Sonya snapped shortly, discarding the file she had been working on only to pull another off the stacks waiting for her. "Peter, take my latest idiot dependent and go see what Master Yazou makes of him. Hopefully, he can figure out whatever hair-trigger reflexes he's got before someone else runs into it."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 21st of April, 1970 continued. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"If none of my staff have seen the man in the last week, there's nothing new I can offer you." Sonya informed the militsiya officer blandly, taking a moment since she was distracted anyways to see what the date on this form was. "I've barely been here long enough to actually meet my employees."

"Yeah… speaking of, why the hell weren't you here? From the sounds of it, no one really knows who you are or what you're doing. Trying to hide something?"

"This is an international school." She stated bluntly, already annoyed and getting to the very limits of the definition of the term. "If you failed to notice, China doesn't really have a whole lot of teaching going on. Because of these little things called 'student riots'. In fact, what little they have is all outsourced. To places like here. Those sending their students here kind of like to know the money isn't going to waste and their brats are being taught something of use."
The man huffed, unconvinced. "That accounts for a month, Miss Bazanova."

"Shows what you know." Giving up on the paperwork, she'd only gotten to January in a few days so a few more would hopefully mean she could finish this marathon sometime soon, she leaned back in her ill-used office chair and gave her uninvited guest the full brunt of her glare. "Then there was connecting with another sister school's instructors, hopefully setting up a little… joint educational exchanges in the near or far future in return for a week-long guest lecture that ran a few days over. A bit of touring around others, ensuring what we've set up to replace the previous schools would keep up against capitalist efforts. Then there's my fucking life, because as much as I love my mother... I'm not good with pounding the basics into a child's head. Give me those that know the basics, and I do a hell of a lot better."

"So, you won't mind accounting for your movements the last couple of days, right?" Drawled out the law enforcement officer sarcastically, all but calling her a liar to her face.

"I'd be delighted to."

The packet of information Viper assembled for her was tossed to the desk, and the Storm-Cloud leaned backwards in her chair with a sneering smirk when he didn't even bother to glance at it.

He knew she wasn't 'legal', she knew he knew, and this was all just really fucking pointless until he could prove it enough to his superiors. Enough to risk trying to actually arrest her.

Nothing here was illegal aside the few gemstones that she stole, and those were mixed in with the ones they had receipts for if the police ever managed to find where they were hidden. They took very pointed pangs to ensure the school was as legal as physically possible, and some ways that were improbable thanks to the Mist ranks.

…and the government couldn't use illegal methods against anyone in the school because the vory were watching this place closely enough that their protection was obvious, not to mention Usov had already defied the KBG and she'd bet on his Misty madness more than any government organization.

Nothing good came from trying to knock over a school, either for protection money or the territory grab, except the ill-will of everyone involved. The militsiya couldn't 'win' this by force or direct methods anyways, even discounting the Flame users training here. Given the international students, they also couldn't keep it quiet because eventually the Triads would demand to know what the hell happened to their students.

Pointless hostile interrogations were not particularly fun to suffer through. Especially not diplomatically.

"Look, all I know of the incident is what I was told. I've maybe held one or two conversations with the man, and one was over the damn phone."

"And yet you hired him."

"Because he had the permits." Sonya, more than tired of this entire farce yet knowing she couldn't just blow off the man entirely because they couldn't afford an in-depth investigation for long, pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the never-ending pile of them in her top left desk drawer and almost forgot the lighter tucked in next to them. "He had a history of teaching experience. We didn't have the full opening, but he didn't mind taking some of the sports teams to manage while waiting on the class expansions to allow full time for another set of literature arts classes. Most others given the same offer refused. Everything from records alone said he was a diligent teacher, yet now we have five fucking complaints of inappropriate behavior to some of the students. Three girls, two boys. If he
showed up at all since the last one, as we were going to fire the asshole, then you might have cause to be a pain in my ass. Right now, you don't."

"That can be taken as a confession."

"Seriously, get a life." Leaning back with the cigarette for a momentary break, because she doubted Galina was feeling that generous after disappearing on her, she gave the man a completely deadpan stare down. "Or, preferably, do your fucking job so I can fire this asshole and get him off our damn records."

"You think you're real safe here?"

"I'd still bet on my father than your entire precinct."

The opening was seized upon with an almost pathetic quickness, as if the militsiya officer really thought she'd be the one to say that one thing they could finally nail to Arseniy. "You think your old man protects you, little girl? If at best, you're a means to an end."

"Obviously." Drawled out the thief sarcastically, because Arseniy really hadn't want a family at first. He went along with things because Lisa wanted it, and as long as that was true he'd put up with everything that came with it. "But, as long as I am a means to an end, I'm still more important than you."

"How long do you think that can last?"

"Long enough." Sonya dismissed sharply, more than tired of the entire conversation and his face. "Longer than you can afford. Are you quite done yet wasting my time?"

"Eventually your wicked little deeds will catch up to you, where will you be then?"

"In a country a hell of a lot warmer than this ice sheet."

With a very disgusted tisk, which she didn't give two fucks for, the man turned sharply on his heel and stomped out of her office.

No, good Soviet citizens did not bail out of their homeland. She was definitely not a good citizen in several ways, and with somewhat half-forgotten plans to get the hell out of the Soviet Union since childhood she intended to see through.

It had been for a reason, right?

Not just out of an American girl's delicate sensibilities?

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(Thursday the 23rd of April, 1970. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"My son would like a word."

"Son of a fucking bitch." Was Bazanova's immediate response to hearing the utterly unsurprising factoid.

"Who's the new face?" Milos continued while the girl in question was probably thinking not-so-nice
or appropriate things about his heir and the next Zolotov Pahkan, who was about two days from formally taking the reins of the clan.

"Who the fuck knows, he sure as shit doesn't." That delightfully comprehensive if short dismissal given, the young buck simply lighting a finger with ruby red Flames to show why he was there under old man Zolotov's unimpressed look and a shrug when that didn't immediately deter him, the young blonde grabbed three things from a drawer to shove in a purse and stood up somewhat sharply from her desk. "Usov, your parents are ready… right?"

"Yes, we're ready."

Straightening up, she pointed a finger in the newcomer's face. "You, go with the Mist kid this weekend. You're going to Italy, you'll see why when you get there. Galina, start pulling together that list of 'possible' replacement teachers and future hires now we're almost done with a school year. Keep Peter in when he gets back, I might want to kick him out too. Are you coming with me, Pahkan?"

"I'm tempted." Although, he highly suspected she meant to go see his son and not to an Italian castle on the coast for at least a couple months.

"I would… appreciate someone to mediate." Allowed Bazanova after a moment of thought, not vacating her office but just looking straight at him.

"Likely, a very smart idea." Milos allowed, just a touch bitter and dry, even if it was mostly for appearance's sake. "I'd rather not lose my heir this damn close to finally shoving off."

She very obviously rethought whatever it was she was about to say without thinking really fucking fast and elected to remain silent as she gestured him to take the lead.

It only took half a hallway, one she cleared out herself due to none of the others wanting to be nearby an office that had mysteriously multiplying medieval weaponry being tossed out of, for her to grow somewhat suspicious. Her respect for him had her soldiering through two more before she spoke up, obviously finally thinking through his actual words and not just what was assumed from hearing them.

"…what did you really want, Pahkan?"

Milos came to a stop as well, turning around to see the woman peering at him semi-suspiciously. "I am aware Gedeon's not the ideal Pahkan you and yours would've liked to see, Bazanova. However, he will be."

"And?" She countered after a moment, looking somewhat puzzled now instead of wary. "I will have nothing to do with him due to 'irrecoverable differences', according to the rest of the Flame users."

"He is still due some respect, especially when you can't duck him anymore."

"Forgive my imperiousness," she offered almost immediately, "but Gedeon will never be my Pahkan. You are, and while I was satisfied with the status quo for a time… eventually there'd be growing pangs. Especially as other people will not stop finding their own reasons to tag along just for shits and giggles."

He blew out an aggravated sigh at the backhanded compliment, which she did nothing but blink at. Flattery was always a valid option to either get out of trouble or to get into it, he couldn't really find much fault in her statement to nitpick at.
If, when asked in the future, she had to comment on what she thought about the Zolotov direction for those digging up dirt to sling at his heir… it was entirely likely she was offering to repeat the same statement with minor variation. It was also entirely likely she’d use that to continually find fault with Gedeon as well, because while the son was somewhat like the father… he wasn’t a carbon copy.

Gedeon was his own man, with his own faults and strengths. Future mistakes and successes to get into on his own. Forever being compared to his old man only to be found wanting would be infuriating, because it’d take him just as long to reach the level of competence Milos only now had at the end of his life.

Others assuming that while he could handle a budding master thief in the making, to the point both parties were content with the arrangement, it turning out Gedeon wasn’t as skilled and so she left to find her own way was not particularly damaging to anyone’s reputation. Others finding out his son mishandled a user of Dying Will Flames of Cloud so badly she was probably inches away from justifiable if suicidal homicide… less so.

"Pahkan, additionally… did Usov arrange a set or team of Mists to handle whatever he's doing for you?"

"That's all handled, Bazanova. You're still safe for a couple more days." Even if the tetchy brat informed him, deadly serious in a jarring contrast to how bouncily all over the fucking place he was normally, that if the Mists let go of their Construction shoring up his health it was highly likely he'd die on the spot if he had any further complications with his health.

Milos would take that gamble, just for a few days of healthy living to get this over with. He could die later, once he wasn't the lynchpin holding everything together.

It was really rare someone got to pass on what they built to a son in this lifestyle, it was more common to hand it off to another rising criminal mastermind. He didn't think it worked much differently the further out from the USSR you got, but he was at least semi-sure she'd fudge the actual percentage if asked just to mess with Gedeon.

"Does this mean I don't have to speak to your son?"

"I'm sure as hell not giving him the rope to hang himself with." He knew his son, he'd immediately try the very next opportunity to have a word with the departing head of the Flame department the moment no one could block him and get away with it. By then it'd be a moot point, aside the money Bazanova was as good as free and clear when he stepped down. "I would like your word that you won't overthrow him. Whatever happens, and whoever asks you to when being a woman isn't exactly a barrier to the rest of the vory."

The young woman went oddly, deadly still suddenly. It took a long second for her to actually respond, and by that point the slow curling smirk on her lips already told him a lot of what she was about to say. "…old man, I'm not the one you should be worried about. I've better things to do than dick around here holding the hands of those without a drop of common sense."

…fuck's sake. "Bazanova-"

"Gedeon will get exactly what he thinks he wants, only to realize it's exactly the opposite a touch too late, and I don't have to lift a damn finger for it." The ballsy woman cut him off, almost bored in both tone and expression aside the murderous little gleam of red in her normally grey eyes. "He's going to do it to himself, Pahan. Although… he does have a momentary grace period to either prove himself or die horribly in the end. I know what I'm expecting, from what I've seen and the odds… he's not going to do it in time."
"If I had the capability to have a heart attack, I'd probably be suffering one right now." Given what she said, whatever she was counting on wouldn't be ready for some measure of years. Milos didn't exactly have the time to outwait and try countering whatever it was if it was already set up without her interference, although he'd damn well try because he already knew Gedeon wouldn't take the threat seriously enough if she was outright leaving. "Are you going to give any hints?"

Sometimes, occasionally, some of his opponents were that stupid. He had the sinking suspicions she wasn't going to be one of them, and not just because she had successfully negotiated with him before into things he didn't really want to give up.

"Why would I do that?" She asked, honestly fucking curious. "I have, specifically mind you, made it not my business. I'll even give you my word, Pahkan, I will not interfere. All of it, everything, will happen because it will happen and not even the one I'm speaking of realizes this. It's nature, especially in this society."

"...one of your Flame users?"

By the small and honestly amused smile that that nasty smirk turned into, he was entirely off the mark.

"Pahkan, the Flame users of the clan are my business right now. Besides which, it might very well be not a Flame-nature thing. I'm not going to count on that, because from what we've already learned Flame natures are just as mutating as human nature is entirely. No, it's going to happen because Gedeon's not really a good Pahkan candidate for what we really need as a thieves clan holding a significant number of Flame users."

"He's thirty-"

"Are you really that old? Thirty might seem young to you, but that's firmly in the category of 'middle-age' these days. A decade older than me. Yes, he might just have another half a century before him… but that's already three decades of life gone." Considering it, the blonde eventually shrugged. "At best, he'll get two decades. Less, if things go off the rails spectacularly in the next decade. And I? I'll… watch from afar when things finally implode. With popcorn and apparently a shit ton of mead."

…two decades wasn't actually all that shabby. Fifty should be around the time Gedeon finished looking for an heir of his own and started on training them up, as a matter of fact he should probably pull the old man card the moment he retired and start hounding his son about grandchildren.

The real question was if that would put a dent in whatever she expected or not.

Milos examined his last if unexpected political opponent of his career critically, trying to figure out what the hell she was counting on without directly asking and giving any possible plans to counter her away.

He hadn't really expected trouble from this corner, more fool him.

Apparently he hesitated a touch too long, because that unnerving red gleam disappeared and the woman offered a politely intent expression. "On to more… interesting subjects. Pahkan, did you have any particular plan to go out with?"

"Yes... but, why do you ask?"

"We have a few things we need answers for, and there's Usov's insanity goal to meet before he leaves." Bazanova offered pleasantly, although he didn't really understand what she was offering. "I need to somehow get all the heads of the various groups sending us Flame brats together without
their delicate sensibilities getting in the way because I'm female and answer a few burning questions about our 'legal' limitations. Would you mind issuing the invitations, just sort of a last hurrah?"

"What 'legal'" Cutting himself off this time, which he wasn't going to forget but now wasn't the time to cut her off and lose the information she might divulge, Milos eyed her curiously. "...oh. Oh, I like that idea."

It was unfortunate she'd probably not take the suggestion to wait for Gedeon to take his position well, nor would she play nice with his son if that eventuality. Not even when in front of outsiders.

...but he could use that. Entirely.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 23rd of April, 1970 continued. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You again... did you find that asshole yet?" Sonya questioned in something that couldn't just be described as 'tartly', shooting a just arrived militsiya officer a nasty glare. "Or are you just here to waste more time?"

"I'm here to waste more of your time." Was the jaunty, jarringly pleasant reply from the broad shoulder man.

Peter couldn't entirely hide a wince when the neatly uniformed police officer turned that overly self-satisfied attention on him. "Um... yes?"

"Bordrov, correct?" Fishing a pad of paper out of his greatcoat's inner breast pocket, he flipped it open while also pulling a pen out of a trouser pocket. "When was the last time you saw Chikatilo?"

"Friday? The tenth of April, we were going to maybe go drinking again last weekend... but he didn't show. Which actually isn't too unusual lately," hurried on the thin Sun before another question could be asked, anxiously not darting a glance at the woman that helped him enter the country illegally, "he's been, ah... had been missing a few of them. Without telling me or Artemiy."

"Any reasons given for why?" Asked the man curiously as he jotted something he couldn't read upside down.

"Ah... not as far as I heard in so many words. Artemiy, Dyrbov, might know more as they taught the same subject and could speak more often."

He glanced upward skeptically, and while tempted to blather on... Scruffy kept his mouth shut.

Sonya had, sometime after she faked his paperwork trail, absently given a handful of tips to use if he ever had to speak with an official or a member of the local law enforcement. Galina added a handful of her own when the incident with Miss Fink was over with, and neither of them had 'ramble aimlessly' among what was 'acceptable'.

'Don't volunteer information' was one of Sonya's, the Lightning had chipped in the 'unless it is common information they can gain from another place or person' modifier.

"Nothing else to add, Bordrov?"

"Ah... we usually tally grades up on the weekends. Here. We, or at least I, expected him to show up Saturday... because the rifle club had a mid-week qualifier before the semi-final shooting
"competition at the end of the month." Yanlin had to do it, Sunday.

The Chinese Rain did at least live nearby and hadn't minded the imposition after their boss informed him of why his fellow co-coach was… indisposed.

"Why the fuck didn't you ask that Monday?"

"Missing persons cases generally take a bit longer than a few hours of missing work to be defined." Clarified the militsiya officer rather snottily, catching Peter's widened eyes and apparently mistaking the reason for it. "You know she's a criminal, right?"

"That's a bold claim." Observed the professional thief tartly, yanking a file from her stack of them to compare something to the set of papers already in front of her. "Although, when you creatively interpret laws, I suppose just about everyone is one. Even... why, you."

She earned herself a snort, before the law enforcement officer turned on the Sun again. "So, what didn't you say?"

"…Chikatilo was convinced we were covering something up?" Peter reluctantly offered, enough genuine distaste to his tone he hoped the other man wouldn't dig too deeply. "He ran into the remains of a group session held by the Chinese students attempting to adjust to living here, run by Yanlin. Then he started... asking around about something no one ever got a clear answer to."

"…interesting."

Sonya rolled her eyes at the semi-superior look shot at her.

"Have a different... interpretation for this, then?"

"I'm not doing your job for you." Stacking together whatever packet of documents was before her, including the file she pulled, that was set aside to start in on the next waiting her signature. "Why don't you try, I don't know... actually investigating something instead of strut ting around like a rooster?"

The still unnamed militsiya officer turned around, thankfully dismissing anything further Scruffy would have to speak given he tucked away his little notebook. "Bold claim, what makes you think I haven't?"

"All five of those complaints I gave you explicitly stated 'Chikatilo would not accept their answers for what they were doing' at the time of each incident." Shooting him an utterly nasty little smirk, the woman signed off whatever she was on and dumped the papers into her 'finished' pile. "So obviously you're doing jack shit instead of... you know... your job, you would've had an inkling he thought we were some kind of front-thing before Bordrov had to tell you."

It took him a second to recall that was his name, and not the militsiya officer's. She had never used it after just informing him of what his assumed name would be for his time in Moscow, actually just defaulting to calling him 'Scruffy' if she couldn't or shouldn't call him 'Peter'.

Like when everyone decided to invent reasons to suddenly get all their paperwork for various classes recorded and tailed together for the final grades two months early, just to actually see and reassure themselves that they were hired by an actual human and not just some front company invention.

Calling the policeman by Peter's assumed name would probably help very little in the long run.

"Really? 'Thought' is the story you're going with?"
"If we were doing anything remotely interesting with the kids, I'd have less bullshit paperwork to go through and wouldn't be sitting here approving the purchases of fucking janitorial equipment long enough for you to bother." Claimed the thief flatly, taking a break to lean back in her office chair and just give the two men in her office her full attention. "By all means, if you can think to slap something on top of 'we fucking needed a damn school' in this part of the city... I'd be interested in hearing it. It might be good for a laugh or two."

"There is a damn-"

"Don't make me laugh." Sonya outright sneered back. "There's too many children in the local schoolhouse where I grew up for me or my siblings to attend it a decade ago, and this is a city. There are always more children to teach. More adults moving in to make yet more children. How the fuck do you think we can keep up without building more schools? So what if I had to go through my connections with my father to afford the place and the security, it's another fucking school. My mother can't do it forever."

"And that explains why the hell you've got Chinese exchange students, I suppose."

She didn't directly respond to the sarcastic question, merely lifted an equally condescending eyebrow back.

With an unconvinced hum, the man turned on a heel to stalk right on out of the office just as abruptly as he came in.

"...Peter. Assemble and pack up whatever you can't live without for a short while." Turning back to her still towering but significantly reduced pile of papers awaiting her attention, the thief sighed heavily before reaching for her next file. "I don't think they're going to let this one go."

He blinked blankly at her, confused. "What?"

"It's been a week, why are they still around if not to try and find some kind of dirt?" Glancing through the first one she picked up, she then picked through seven others and snorted softly at whatever she found in them. "So... either they locally decided to try knocking this school over or someone higher up is behind their more intent than warranted behavior. I'll go check which it is tonight, but I need all the vulnerable parts ready to move on short notice if things are that bad."

"Boss lady, does an investigation into a missing person differ any from an investigation into a murder or some other crime?" Cautiously inquired the Sun slowly, unsure if his sudden wonder had any bearing on the topic.

He wouldn't know, but she might.

"...I have no idea." Proving him wrong while drumming her fingers on her desk, she considered the files before her and then her office door.

Galina had gone to fetch them dinner, because for whatever reason even if she was in Moscow Sonya was disinclined to really interact with her employees. They'd seen her, and the fact the pile of paperwork was being decimated, which made the woman a hot topic for gossip. Which might really be the reason she was reluctant to meet her teachers more than just the basic greetings, especially as the principal's office was right outside of what had been turned into a teacher's lounge.

"I'm going to go speak with my father, tell Galina when she gets back I'll solve the rest of her 'make up' work tomorrow. But then, as the Pahkan's retiring Saturday, I'm not going to re-do the rest of the paperwork my mother already did once I no longer need a reason to stay out of the office in
"Ah... when did you catch on?"

"About half the reference files have Lisa's signature on them." Observed the thief dryly as she rose from her seat, gesturing to the paperwork she was probably abandoning. "Besides which, a number of them are or look to have been time-sensitive. Lastly, although obviously Galina tried somewhat hard to gain an extra copy of the paperwork as they came in before Lisa could sort and deal with it... the watermarks and properly filed ones in the back file cabinet are still there."

...Scruffy lost the bet, then. Galina had been somewhat certain she'd catch on in short order but getting the thief to at least do a good portion on the work she left them to do was her goal.

"Still, if you can avoid raising suspicions, pack up."

Sonya slinked out of the office before he could think of something to say.

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(Friday the 24th of April, 1970. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"There's no real timeline." Arseniy informed her simply, absently taking another bite of his breakfast as Lisa very pointedly set a portion of her lunch before the youngest foster child. "It'll take however long it takes, for both murder and missing persons cases. Longer for the latter, most of the time."

"Will my sudden abandonment of everything tomorrow affect that in any way?"

"No." That was such a bold-faced and obvious lie even Valera gave their father a skeptical look from his chair, which really was Cherep's spot, next to her at the table.

"Sweetie, stop worrying and delaying." Looking up when fingers sunk in her somewhat longer hair, Sonya studied the older woman's very pointed look. "If you need to leave, then just leave. We'll handle everything else as it comes up."

"...I didn't want to leave things worse off."

"You're not." Lisa informed her strongly, so she'd know not to try arguing, as she finally took a seat herself. "The whole branch of the clan you've been managing is more inclusive and easier to overlook by one person now, Dmitriy should find it very easy to slid right back in. It's done, stop worrying."

That was somewhat easier to say than do, but instead of huff unconvinced the younger woman just started eating.

Lisa wouldn't let her leave until she did.

The vor presiding over the meal gave her a pointed look. "You will be home for Christmas."

"And now I don't need to attend the Vongola Balls anymore as Renato's human shield, I can bring Shamal and myself up sooner."

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch." Was Lisa's contribution before taking a neat bite out
of the shchi so Valera could study and copy her in his new 'big kid' spot around the table.

Her brat of a little brother had decided he was too old for the old high chair and promptly let himself out of it when stuck in it, starting a couple days ago. Their mother had simply stacked a few of the couch cushions in Cherep's place at the table and let Valera eat from there as long as he tried not to make a mess.

There'd be a mess anyways, the toddler wasn't remotely coordinated yet.

"Besides which, now that your sister has copied you in dating an Italian man, won't Tats need to attend? Are you going to let her go alone?"

From the utterly aggravated sigh at the head of the table, Arseniy was not happy with that situation.

Sonya paused with her spoon in her mouth, and seriously thought about it.

On one hand, she really didn't want to do yet another stupid Ball thing. Especially without Renato, because the Mafioso was really the only one that had a reason to go network with a couple influential Dons of the Italian Mafia. A freelance hitman like him kind of needed to be able to gauge and weigh the balances of power in person like that, to know what kind of leeway was possible for his jobs.

On the other… again, she only had one sister and the last time she attended a Ball there was the little matter of flying knives going through her foot.

This was all rather moot of a point, however. The Vongola Christmas Ball was by invitation only kind of affair, and she highly doubted she merited an invite on her lonesome.

She informed her mother of that, only to earn a highly amused look in return.

…what was she missing?

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 24th of April, 1970 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Culturally speaking, dining out in Moscow was kind of a once-in-a-lifetime event. Restaurants, not bars or a drinking house, were rare and getting into one required a significant amount of leverage or prestige. Currently, the very act of ordering something to eat that you or your spouse didn't prepare was seen as decadent and not something good Soviet Russians did on a day to day basis.

Milos got into more than his fair share, due to being the Pahkan of the Zolotov Thieves' Clan, which likely included taking his son along but… Sonya had only been in an actual restaurant three times in Moscow before this.

Not the bars which would also serve food occasionally if you knew how to ask, or the tiny teahouses which served snacks to take along with a cup of tea or coffee. Actual full restaurants that served food first and maybe something alcoholic second, that you had to sit down for or reserve a spot ahead of time, those were seen as something only the cream of the crop of Moscow society did regularly.

There was the restaurant that Arseniy really liked, where she took Renato after that opera-date night thing. Which was a hell of a lot easier to get into than civilian run affairs, especially for criminals. It was also kind of shifty in the extreme, and never really lingered in the same place for long before 'reopening' up in a different building. The hitman actually found it for her when he was just exploring the city at night, and when he asked about the very subtle signs that advertised its
relocation she figured taking him at least once should be something to do since it was so rare.

The third time she ever entered a Moscow restaurant was just earlier this month, the 'last' professional gathering her Pahkan would throw just because he could and to show off his influences, and she hadn't really stopped to order anything.

This one was her fourth.

Old man Zolotov was enjoying the ugly looks shot at her, seated at his side and not as an uninvited plebeian forced to wait out her superior's dining experience. Sonya had actually ordered at random, not really all that interested in eating something she couldn't watch be made, while they waited for the restaurant to 'close' so they could all speak freely.

The kholodets she ended up with was okay, but she honestly thought Lisa made it better.

A lifetime ago, she would've probably skipped over the jellied meat entirely. It wasn't bad, in taste, but the texture was actually something that had taken her a moment to get over.

"Done?" Milos asked curiously as the restaurant's lights started ticking off until only the back corner they were seated in had any illumination.

"I'd advise you to eat what you want now, you're about to lose any kind of appetite." Allowed one of the man's thieves idly, recalling how shaken Galina and even herself had been the last time she saw a member of the Vindice.

"I'm finished." Observed the old Pahkan tartly, leaning back to instead cradle a glass of pure vodka. "I don't think either of us really care much for everyone else's appetites."

…point.

Sonya eyed the stack of paperwork first, but without Galina she really didn't know enough about whomever they named to be which group of men. Skipping that entirely, if they wanted the information they could damn well introduce themselves, she instead rose to her low-heeled feet holding just the one file currently in question.

The KGB files that Usov had liberated from around Moscow under her supervision.

The Mist in question was her 'aide' tonight but was disinclined to actually physically show up until the Vindice did. Something she wasn't particularly against, because with the topic about to be opened up 'hyperactive' didn't do the preteen Mist justice right now.

Flatly ignoring the fact a good portion of the men in the room were ignoring her, the Storm-Cloud instead lifted her head to address the ceiling. "Officer of the Vindice, we require some clarification. Your Laws state that Flame users are to police ourselves from government awareness, but what do we do with the information we acquire from the government? Turn it into you, or simply dispose of it if not particularly interesting?"

Usov appearing directly in front of her was the only real warning she got.

Silent, black as pitch chains snagged the file out of her hand and dragged it somewhere behind her. All sound, even the mummer of ongoing conversations and the clink of steel against china, suddenly stopped.

Sonya turned around, very carefully hiding the grimace that wanted to show when she recognized the Officer as the last Vindice that visited the last time a gathering like this occurred.
"Disposal is adequate enough." Spoke the creature, and even Milos couldn't really avoid the shudder the tortured voice caused all in earshot.

"In the question of avoiding political office," continued the thief warily as the floor beneath the white bandaged figure of a man turned pitch black and before the shadowy energy could swallow it, "the Mists would like to know if influencing them while avoiding their positions is valid."

They didn't, really. Usov had made absolutely no noise to that effect, she just really wanted it called before someone had to make a fairly awkward visit to a family to inform them their child had been arrested for reasons they weren't sure about.

The file she brought with and it looked like the Vindice Officer intended to make away with was softly slapped back closed, the eerie and utterly blank visage considered her a long moment before the next answer was offered. "Case by case."

…likely that meant there needed to be a reason for it, not just 'for shits and giggles'. Thankfully there was enough time that Usov could break that news instead of her.

"Lastly," Sonya pressed her luck once more, actually getting somewhat nauseous from what seemed to just been nerves the longer this 'visitation' dragged on, "in the case of civilian Flame users. If when found they do not represent a significant security risk for discovery by either government or militaristic organizations, may we leave them alone after passing on the Laws?"

She didn't get a verbal response, or even more than a moment of heavy consideration. The Vindice Officer merely held its blank face in her direction for a long moment, then sunk rather abruptly into the ground.

She stared at the spot in the rug the Vindice had picked to appear at, just feeling exactly how much her body calmed down by the removal of the dead Arcobaleno.

What was that?

The sensation?

It wasn't something a Mist could copy as effortlessly, and even felt through her Storm Flames?

Usov wrapped his arms around her hips, setting a pointy chin on a hipbone. "Well… that wasn't an introduction."

"You failed to speak up, it's your own damn fault." Stepping through him, because of course the little Mist brat decided to fuck off now that the 'interesting' part of this was over, she returned to her seat right next to the Zolotov Pahkan.

Milos, very thoughtfully to the point it was semi-suspicious, handed over another glass of vodka. "That's it?"

"I really don't fucking care if these assholes get the information they're here for." Sonya confirmed blandly as she ran the non-response and its possible meanings over in her mind a few times. "They can come over here and get it if it's that damn important to them."

"You did just use them all to clarify some long-standing questions."

"And as such, I won't take offense that the bulk of these assholes were trying some sexist 'superiority' bullshit on me." Countered the thief flatly, settling back after her first sip of the clear liquid. "I have no idea why any thought it'd work, Ziven said Dorokhov and I aren't really all that different in
nature and the Khimki Cloud has already killed someone in your little stripper club powwows."

"For 'infringement', I believe you call it."

"He's younger than me by at least half a decade." She tacked onto his semi-statement with a small amount of amusement. "The older the Flame user in question, the less likely we're flexible when it comes to our 'quirks'."

The older man she was seated across from actually laughed, which was really fucking impressive given she couldn't yet shake the unease the Vindice Officer left her with. "You sure you don't want to stay, Bazanova? It'd be interesting watching for the first suicidal moron to actually press you beyond what you're going to allow."

"I believe that already happened." Sonya reminded him, only a touch tartly. "And no, Pahkan. You're one thing, I grew up under you. Gedeon's... entirely someone different, and Clouds don't do well with sudden changes."

After that delightful lie through her teeth, the first man with any kind of balls finally approached their tables. Milos gestured from the man to her, in a carefully absent gesture. "Bazanova, this is Mogilevich Semion. He... you could say, is networking a little in our part of the city."

So... not someone that had business with her. The thief slid her gaze back to her Pahkan curiously, wondering if she should manufacture an excuse to vacate the table for a short while.

"Fascinating to finally meet you, Miss Bazanova."

"...sure." Allowed Sonya carefully, utterly confused as to why he wanted to meet her and why the hell she cared if he did.

"I sent along one of my men, that you sent your delightful Lightning lady to deal with instead." Mogilevich helpfully informed her, taking a sudden and previously not-there seat at their table. "If you need the reminder."

"He didn't exactly say who sent him to me, and Galina didn't have much to say about him." Obediently responded the Storm-Cloud after a moment to connect that with the first of the random vory that found their way to her office. "No one died, right?"

"Ah... no." Allowed the other man, who was probably a good two or three decades younger than Milos so that set him around her age. Tapping some heavy ringed fingers on the table to apparently show himself thinking, the possible-vor leaned in slightly as if that would help any attempts at a quiet conversation. "I'm more interested in the 'possible' Skies-"

"Allow me to cut you off there." Sonya very suddenly and very rudely interrupted. "No."

"No?"

"The one we do know about isn't an active Flame user, and by his age there's no point in trying to 'encourage' anything. The other one we know is somewhere around here isn't known of by anything other than his influences on the number of Flame users around his presence, and even if I knew who that was I'd still say no."

"...so, it does have some bearing to the last question you asked..."

"You're grasping at straws." She informed him pointedly, not biting that bait. "Why don't you put some damn effort into things if you think you know better than me? I'll keep the popcorn ready for
"when you massively fuck up."

Moglevich studied her expression intently. "Is that what you think?"

She got down to the same level he was, leaning forward to encourage his 'illusion' of privacy even in a crowd of professional crooks, only to give him a nasty smirk. "No, that's what I've seen happen time and time again around the world. But by all means, make up your own fantasy on how Flames work from your users. Good luck separating out the fiction from the reality, frankly we even haven't managed to fully do that ourselves."

"So why the resistance?"

"Because it's such a statistical anomaly to find and bond to a Sky that I'm uninterested in the 'fable' of the 'kingpins'. I'm more interested in what bonds two or more non-Sky Flame users can have." Sonya lifted her tattooed shoulder in a shrug. "But again, by all means. Carry on if you just want to ape our European brethren in their personality cults around Sky Flame users."

She'd leave a note for Dmitriy, that someone in his Sky Watch group had loose lips, but other than that she really didn't much care. Whatever happened would happen after she was gone, and Russia would just have to get along without her.

Draining her glass of vodka to get out of here quicker, she very nearly snorted the liquor out of her nose when the man turned to her Pahkan. "Mouthy was an understatement, I see."

"You're disgusting." Sonya drawled out sarcastically, glancing to old man Zolotov herself as she firmly set down her glass. "And I'm done being understanding about slights spoken in my face, Pahkan. Good luck, I think you're going to need it."

"Are you going to be at the retirement party, Bazanova?"

"No." She didn't want to get that close to Gedeon, frankly. "But I will check in with you before I leave Russia."

"Good enough." Decided Milos, as if that had any bearing on what she'd be doing tomorrow. "The files?"

"Usov will collect them whenever he deems acceptable."

"One last question, Bazanova."

"Fuck you." Tossed the Storm-Cloud over a shoulder, not stopping on her way to the bank of mirrors set against a wall. Anna very obligingly opened up the mirror to connect to her hotel suite, cutting short the entire process of stealing the Pahkan's driver to get home instead.

The Mirror Lady even graciously kept a portion of the portal open enough for her to hear Milos mention how utterly unsurprised he was that she left as she had, even if someone was talking to her.

After all, she had already put a burning hole in Moscow's streets for assholes getting fresh with her.

The fact Usov put the files she brought with her on the dresser in her bedroom, except the one the Vindice Officer made away with, almost immediately after she let herself into it did make her smirk as she set about disassembling her 'finery' for bed.

Well, she had warned the assholes she'd only attend such meetings twice.
It'd be interesting to hear what complaints Dmitriy would have for her when he got out of prison next month. If he got out with 'good behavior', otherwise Gedeon would have about half a year to run things into the ground.

(ooo000000)

(Friday the 24th of April, 1970 continued. Samuil household, Voykovsky District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Oh good, you're home." Zinaida breathed out as her son picked to simply appear on his rather bare bed when she looked into the room. "Usov, you have the tickets... right?"

"I gave them to father." Usov reported cheerfully, scooting off his bed and following her into the somewhat tiny common room their apartment had. "Relax, mother. Everything is handled, we just have to show up tomorrow."

"I can't really help it... Italy's really far, Usov." Given the distance they really couldn't take the furniture with them, and even their household goods had to be paired down with only the promise of picking up locally made versions once they were in the country. "Maxim, do you have-"

Maximillian very pointedly placed an airplane ticket into each of the three passports in his hands, before setting them on their soon-to-be abandoned dining table. "Zina, calm down. Just sit down for a minute, before you forget your own head."

Knowing full well the two of them would gang up on her, Zinaida slowly slunk down into their very broken-in couch. "...what do you think Italy is going to be like?"

"Like here, but warmer?"

Usov snorted at what he claimed was their 'terrible imagination', sprawling out over her lap just to give her a bright grin. "It's a different country! It should be exotic and interesting, not the same-old!"

"Similarities are comforting." She pointedly informed her lapful of hectic child, poking him in the stomach to get his feet up so his father could take a corner of the couch too. "And we're not... very experienced with Italian yet. Just talking to someone on the street will be difficult enough..."

"I can help with that, and there's already two Russian speaking residents at the castle." Usov reported to her helpfully. "And we're not the only three going. There's this Storm man, who had his entire past erased yet somehow found Sonya to follow along with to her exasperation. Scruffy might be coming along!"

That poor Storm man. Zinaida bit her lower lip, wondering if her son had spoken of a 'Scruffy' before this so she wouldn't ask about the details that might be a bit intrusive of the other one he spoke about.

"He doesn't like criminal things, so Scruffy hides behind Sonya so he doesn't have to do anything like that." Volunteered her lapful of Mist, not even wincing when his father reached over and pinched the skin of his calf for dipping into the unspoken for questions to prattle on about. "Anna's coming, she's just going to be a bit late. She's got something to check in with on our way. Miss Galina and Sonya herself in anywhere from a few days to another two months, then there'd be a lot of people to speak to."

"What are you going to be doing, Usov?" Maximillian inquired thoughtfully, toeing their threadbare carpet she had gotten for getting married from her grandmother.
It was practically the only thing she wouldn't regret leaving behind, the thing was ugly. As it was a gift she couldn't really bring herself to throw it out, mostly as her grandmother had been proud of her find and she never did work up the courage to tell the older woman how much of an eyesore she found it.

"Security." Usov obediently reported, only to earn two dubious looks for the very prompt and unlikely answer. "Well, the Mirror Lady gets the bulk of it when it comes to visitors. I just get secret keeping and securing the entire castle against hostile intents left behind. Otherwise I'll be helping father. Do you think I'll make a good butler?"

"I think you'll be good at whatever you bend your mind to." Zinaida insisted a bit falsely, because her son wasn't really the kind of servant anyone should want to rely on. It earned her two widely different responses from both the men in her life, adoring from her son and exasperated from her husband. "But, don't you think being your father's 'strong arm' when it comes to collecting receipts and the like would be more fun? Miss Bazanova might not mind you terrorizing those late with them in your unique way then."

The Mist in her lap pouted outrageously, with a wobbling lower lip and the sheen of tears in his eyes. "You don't think I'd be good at it, mother?"

"Fishing for compliments isn't well done of you, son. And besides, you know you'd get bored attending to every little hiccup that arises in the upkeep of a castle and staff."

Any evidence that he looked to be a breath away from bawling disappeared in a startling blink, something that not even nearly five years of watching her son do made it any easier to get used to. "Very true. I suppose then, father, that I'll be your understudy."

"Alas," sighed out Maximilllian tiredly, not even twitching when their son threw him a betrayed pout, "I'll be sure to reserve the worst for you then."

Rolling his eyes so hard he literally rolled off her lap, Usov then peered up at her curiously from the floor instead. "Is leaving Moscow really that hard for you, mother?"

"Not Moscow, but this..." gesturing around at the very barren rooms had both of them also looking around, "...this is where we had you, Usov. You were conceived here, and we raised you here. That kind of history, it is a little hard to leave behind."

Ignoring his disgusted face for the crime of mentioning his parents having any kind of relationship outside of simply being good friends that happened to live in the same place, Zinaida looked across the couch into her husband's warm brown eyes. "It's not particularly big enough for all of us, Zina. Especially if you would like another child."

"I still say Usov could've shared for a couple years." She defended herself slightly sheepishly.

"Usov needs the extra room to contain his ego." Maximilllian drawled dryly, coaxing a laugh from her and a huff of faked insult from the child on the floor. "And, now we do know what was so strange about our first born as well as how to handle it, another child is more than likely."

Suddenly drawing himself up to his somewhat short full height, ten or not he was still a child and it was rather apparent, Usov stuck his nose in the air and started off to his bedroom. "Ew."

"You don't want to be a big brother, Usov?"

"I don't mind, but I don't need to know how you intend to gift me with such." Called back their son from his room, popping his head out through the middle of the door a second later. "Goodnight,
mother. Father. I will pretend to be deaf and stupid for the rest of the night."

She snickered, sliding over to lean on her tiredly amused husband as the wispy Mist Flames faded from existence. "Ah… if only there were thicker walls… and we could trust his claim a bit."

"I think," Maximillian offered as he accepted her adjustment and pulled her closer to lay down with him, "I'm really just going along with all this for the thicker walls. A castle will have to have them, right?"

"And not just so you can be up at the same hours as us?" Zinaida inquired apologetically, because if they had just moved when he lost his last job then her husband wouldn't have had to take second-shift factory work to keep the roof over their heads there.

"And the mead. The mead is pretty much the biggest draw I can think of." Ignoring it when she thumped his chest in protest, her husband sighed heavily. "Unfortunately, I think we also need to go to sleep. If only to be on time tomorrow for our flight to Italy."

"Well… then we can restart the whole 'it's home' process in Italy. Hopefully Miss Bazanova won't mind too much."
The Khimki Cloud eyed the length of wooden pier that jutted from what was arguably 'her' territory into 'his', cautiously edging into the area to 'join' her. "This is still my territory."

"It connects to my territory." She refuted shortly before biting down firmly on her own tongue, returning her gaze to the rushing current under her feet that was the Moscow Canal flushed with the winter-spring melt. "Which is about to not be my territory in a few hours."

The still feisty teenager slunk down to just lean up against one of the wooden posts, watching her slightest movement suspiciously. "You're leaving."

"The old man I brought to you is my old man, anything happens to Ziven go find him." Before he could say whatever insulting bullshit that was nearly written across his face, she very pointedly glared him into silence. "Vor Ziven reports to him. In the absence of myself or the brunette woman that is the next highest person to go to if there's an issue."

Her fellow blond huffed, sliding himself up to sit on one of the wooden posts the two Clouds were using as backrests. "Thought I would be working for whoever replaced you?"

"No." There was a good possibility that would end up to be Gedeon, because of sexists bullshit it wouldn't go to Lisa even if she was Arseniy's partner for however many years now and the one with the best experience of raising headstrong Flame users correctly. "Given what you are, you kind of have to go to anyone that wouldn't immediately sell out Dorokhov for whatever petty reason."

"What am I?"

"What's more commonly known as a 'Mafia Home Tutor'." Sonya collected her legs together and pulled them off the lip of the docks, carefully standing up without also standing on the hem of her skirts. "We haven't really been holding to the letter of the laws for such things, but it boils down somewhat simply. As a Home Tutor, you have to be 'neutral' at worst and 'without influence' at best."

Ziven raised a skeptical eyebrow at her, settling in to fully hear this tidbit out.

"We had to use the position to keep Adrik in one piece, him and his foundling Lightning user." Clarified his fellow thief rather pointedly. "You stand outside of succession, have no stakes in his situation however it resolves in the end, and there is no political or social reason for you to screw over your student. So long as all that's true, you're his 'Mafia Home Tutor'."

He blinked at her blankly.

She sighed, rather annoyed. "In our society, with the people you know of, do you really think if someone needs a very specialized teacher for reasons... they would also want one that could poison or sabotage their vulnerable whatever that needs it? Because they prefer this or that idiot instead of their prospective student for whatever job? If you have no stakes in the succession or the syndicate, aside the inevitable goodwill and favor of your student in the end, there's no reason for you to ensure
he dies horribly for someone else's favor."

"That's... not common sense?"

"Shockingly enough, no." Sonya refuted tartly, pinching the bridge of her nose mainly to warm up the sinus cavity and prevent a sneeze. "As long as you are a 'Home Tutor', if anyone fucks with you to the point of demise Arseniy can use that to call in the Vindice in revenge. I don't expect anyone to really know that, so it's probably something that'll come out in the bitter end. All that said... you can't have 'plans' for him. Just to get him up to competence, as decided by you both, then let him go."

Instead of immediately refused any kind of plan or whatever, Ziven merely scratched under his smooth shaved chin for a second. "Define plans. Because Timur and I have plans for his little gang, and if this means I can't help out any..."

"You're supposed to be more a standby observer when in conflict with other syndicates, unless it's 'for training' and will not result in a net gain aside 'influence' or 'minions'."

"...that works." Turning to his mildly amused student, the hand-to-hand combat specialist cracked a wry grin for him. "We're apparently still training you in territory acquisition."

…she didn't want to know. "This is my last day, Ziven. If there's anything you can think of to make your situation go smoother, then speak up now."

"If vor Arseniy's the one taking over, nothing that can't wait for a full discussion between me and Timur."

"Very well." Collecting her purse, Sonya tipped an absent nod to her fellow Cloud and another for her fellow thief before walking off.

Ziven probably did have designs on his student's future use, he took a touch too long to think up a reason to hesitate. She honestly really didn't care what they were or what the other Cloud would eventually think of it, as long as they knew the rules they could figure out their own ways around them.

It seemed borderline claimable territory was the best plan when the idea was to talk with other Clouds. The only drawback was the time it took to happen, for someone to catch sight of her and the rumors to travel far enough the other Cloud could hear about it.

Now to see if she could replicate the results with the Wolfpack Gang Cloud.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of April, 1970 continued. Ramenki District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Yasenevo was too far from the Moskva River to have convenient docksides branching out over dubiously contested territory. There were a few smaller tributary creeks, and a few puddles masquerading as lakes, and the district was significantly more 'upscale' than the dockside portions of Voykovsky District the Zolotovs occupied.

Thankfully she didn't actually have to go that much further.

Ramenki District, which was the 'halfway' point between Cloud-territories at best, was also significantly more 'civilized' than what she was used to. It held the State University for Moscow, and
one of the rare few film studios she knew of in Soviet territory. Artsy types were not the ones she figured on having much in common with, and she knew perfectly well that was very apparent right now.

While waiting on the Wolfpack Gang to send their Cloud to check in with her, Sonya ended up browsing through the wares the elderly ladies worked on to afford their lifestyles. From pottery to lacy shawls and small carved figurines in everything from wood to stone, homemade soaps, jewelry, and fabric dyes.

The bustling local market was understandable, a district away was the headquarters of the KGB. Spies always needed good disguises, and these made some very damn good components to make up a new physical form.

Less threatening was the film industry located in this district, who all likely needed these kinds of things to help make up specific characters.

The elderly ladies' husbands had their own little tool market, with furniture and heavy rugs for sale. Some of which were obviously restored or repurposed furniture, but sometimes they turned out a hell of a lot better than what she could see the original looked like.

It was interesting to lose a couple hours to, as well as slightly thought provoking as she somewhat wobbled through the polite haggling and small talk part of browsing in a location she couldn't get away with pretending incomprehension of the local language.

What would've happened if she was born a decade or two earlier?

An admittedly odd thought, because she had been born when she had been so the wonder was utterly useless aside a thought experiment. Then again, she might've ended up one of these ladies hawking their wares for a living.

Sonya was debating if she wanted to get various hair dyes, guaranteed to fade in natural shades instead of turning her hair into a streaky mess with how blonde she was, when Vasilyev slid up next to her.

The ginger kid looked rather unimpressed and sulky, with a respectable black eye and a few seemingly freshly missing baby teeth.

"That had better be from combat practice, and not anything else."

"Do you think they're aware I'm going to kill them?"

"I think they expect to 'manage' you to the point you'll be slavishly loyal for whatever fucking retarded reason." sighed the thief, utterly unsurprised and rather annoyed at his plight. "I could 'step in', but it probably won't really help for long. You'll just end up at the mercy at whichever idiot thinks they know better next, more aware of what you're capable of, and I'll be gone by then."

"I want to do it myself." The kid, and he wasn't really all that much older than Usov was, spoke up for himself after a moment of thought.

She was utterly unsurprised to hear it, as she'd want to do them in if it was her too. "You know the older man I brought with me to see you? He's vor Arseniy, technically the head of the training efforts for my syndicate. When I leave, in a few hours, he's the one that you can go to for... reasons."

Her father would have little to no reasons to refuse arming the kid, especially if there was abuse involved.
If it wiped out the Wolfpack Gang, well… who fucking cared.

At this point, she sure as fuck didn't.

"It's all very coincidental to the point I can't actually say there's something… wrong," Vasilyev eventually offered, rubbing his blackened right eye somewhat gingerly, "but I'm not stupid. I kind of get the idea of what they're going for, they want me to be a stupidly thuggish type who couldn't think their way out of a wet paper box."

"Play up expectations until the point you've got the leverage to survive taking them down." Very obvious advice admittedly, but her very pointed sideways glance had him shutting his mouth before he said so. "It's never really obvious and let the first or second 'perfect' opportunities slide by before trying it, but sometimes it's not just them you have to navigate the expectations of. Ensure you know who they all are before you commit to something you can't take back."

Now that she actually took a second to look at his face closely instead of just match coloring to what she expected for this little 'meeting', Sonya could see he had also lost a bit of the child-fat padding his face should've had still. The kid was almost as painfully thin as Cherep had been before she started stuffing his face at every opportunity, before Lisa took over and actually managed to make a dent in her brother's early childhood malnutrition issue.

He hunched thin shoulders up, shoving hands into his corduroy jacket pockets as she wondered if his situation was a new one or just one that it would have developed into anyways no matter what. "I'm expected to report anything you did or say, so I kind of need something more."

"I'm moving to Italy, you're invited if you ever get free and don't feel like staying here." She didn't have physical territory for reasons still undefined, and while she didn't really want to know what it would take to drive off a Classical Cloud from what should've been their territory… causing said Cloud to utterly loathe their native location and those living within it might actually be a possibility.

Vasilyev shot her a disgusted look, which at least might mean this wasn't going to end up with yet another little ankle bitter running around her knees.

Sonya wasn't holding her breath, especially when she could end up with a random Storm out of practically nowhere. Somehow.

"Make up whatever else you think will help you, they're not going to be able to prove or check it in a few hours and I don't care if you make trouble for the Zolotov Clan with this as a reason."

That offer earned her a short nod, before the kid turned practically on a heel to walk off on her.

With a tired huff, she turned to go right back into Zolotov territory to finally bid her last goodbye. It was more than overdue, in her opinion.

(Sunday the 26th of April, 1970. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya warily eyed Galina, with probably more suspicion than was warranted. "…are you sure?"

"We can't have all of our teachers suddenly abandoning the school, especially with the militsiya poking about." She pointedly reminded her, a twisted little smirk on her carefully made up face.
"Someone needs to help your mother hire the replacement teachers, to hold down the situation when you and Peter clear out all of a sudden, and there's at least a defined end-point to my stay here now."

The younger woman kept on eyeing her warily, utterly unmoved by any of that.

Well, Galina was entirely pleased with the situation as such.

It meant she didn't have to think of some natural way for Sonya to suddenly come into possession of an entire zoo.

"Besides which, this means I can bring your old Chinese man down with me. The girl, too."

"Yaozu and Mingxia."

"Why do you recall their names when you barely recall anyone at headquarters?"

"…because they're Fong's."

She blinked grey eyes blankly when she shot her a skeptical look, and so the Lightning just had to accept the Triad member was enough of a reason to enable some consideration from her boss. When the woman really didn't even bother to extend that courtesy to the very men that made up the syndicate she was no longer part of, up to and including very powerful people she was just introduced to.

A rap of knuckles on the wooden frame of the open office door drew their attention over, and Larion the Rain poked his head into the office curiously. "Miss Bazanova?"

"What."

"We require a… technical overlook." The young Rain offered as an excuse as he fully stepped into the room with the two women. "Preferably without the possibility of witnesses and because you're probably the strongest Storm in the school right now."

"Ah…" Considering it for a second, the Storm-Cloud slowly pulled her booted feet off the desk and straightened the chair to stand up. "Alright."

"One more thing." Larion took a deep breath, then fell to his knees hugging the highly alarmed thief's legs to his thin chest. "Don't leave me here."

"…the fuck?"

"Do you know how aggravating herding Rains in concentration is?" Hissed out the young Rain, almost in tears to the painfully visible alarm of the rigidly stiff blonde. "I like getting along with my fellows. It's a perk to being what I am. I dislike getting along with purposefully blind fellows that don't see their behavior as petty and disruptive, because everyone else is doing the same!"

"Um…" Floundered Sonya, darting a desperate look to Galina and then back to the child that had her legs in his grip.

"You might want to let her go. It seems you're short-circuiting her brain." She 'helped', smirking wickedly at the very aggravated but still somewhat thankful look the younger woman shot her when he did so. "What about your parents, Larion?"

"Mom's willing to relocate." At the pensive frown that crossed the blonde's lips, the little Rain had
some flex of expression that twisted sourly before he could control it. "Dad's... he would be really happy to leave too."

"You could go somewhere else in Moscow-"

"And then have to deal with 'poaching.'" Larion interrupted, entirely unapologetic at her short look for the rudeness. "You're not around much, Bazanova, and your father's been on top of the 'official' attempts on school grounds... but with the training sections doing their things off-site there's been... incursions."

"Is that why the Storms broke up early?"

"Partially." He confirmed for her, which was news to both of the women. "It contributed to it and helped them work out aggression at a valid target for a while, but mainly it was a thought to deal with the inability to get far before things broke down into petty arguments. Us Rains, well... no one really stays awake long enough to try. And the Lightnings are too unpredictable for anyone to have tried with Miss Galina's group yet, which also includes the Mists, but Andrei knows what I'm talking about."

They had to move the Flame training sections back to the schoolhouse then, sooner rather than later. Galina actually hadn't had the Lightnings meet up together in bulk for a while now, because quite frankly there was little for them to actually do but gossip or swap incriminating stories and if there were any irregularities in movement patterns then it helped conceal the other groups from outsiders. Which, with an on-going missing persons' case being carried out, returning the training sessions to the schoolhouse wouldn't be possible as quickly as it was prudent.

"And, before you suggest it, we can't go anywhere else in Russia. Eventually, the same things here will happen again wherever else." Continued the Rain while the Storm-Cloud and Lightning absorbed the information he offered. "Either the whole 'attack my parents to get me to do whatever they want' or 'end up training others that either do or don't want it' in the esoteric skill of Dying Will Flames. If I don't want to do this the rest of my life, and my parents don't want to be risks to me, then I have to either-

"Stop." Sonya demanded, lifting a hand to her right temple to just put pressure on it as if she had a headache. "I get it. If I say no, will you move anyways?"

"Dad's getting insistent about it, mom and I can't... really argue." Larion agreed slowly. "I mean, they'd go through him easily enough to just get to me. It's happened before, and we don't... want to do that again. Especially if you're gone. I was lucky once, Miss Bazanova. I probably won't get that so easily again."

"Is he prepared to move himself and his family so far? I don't... really need much aside just hands for upkeep, and if you're going to live with me you're damn well going to make use of yourselves."

The kid shrugged both shoulders, gesturing out the sole window in this office to the outside. "It'll be better than here, especially if the main threat to keep poaching attempts manageable is about to leave."

That hand slid to her face, and the blonde just sat there with her head in her hand for a long moment. "That's never going to change if no Flame users grow up enough to protect the ones coming after them."

"I'm eleven. Dad's... not really willing to risk it, either."
"And Irinei tries, but not a whole lot of the other Rains actually trust him for much. That's... I don't know how to help that without either breaking up the Rain group or inviting in different Flame users, and they're too stubborn to let that happen without spending more effort than I should for such a situation."

"I got the point, kid." Sonya grumped irritably, absently cracking her neck as her hand smoothed down her throat. "Do your folks have passports?"

"...no?"

"It doesn't really matter, we can get around that, but it helps." Getting to her feet, and pointedly gesturing for the Rain to get to his feet as well, she started moving to the office door and whatever else the kid had come in here for. "You'll leave with the Mirror Lady, then. As long as your parents obey what she tells them and can do half the trip on their own as she's got a... small errand to run for me somewhere you probably don't want to set foot in, I guess you can come along."

Galina remained in place, well aware what Larion's Rains wanted with the strongest Storm Flame user of the school. She was mildly impressed a whole morning had gone by without Gedeon trying something as he had been rather intent on doing the last week.

Apparently Milos was keeping the new Zolotov Pahkan rather occupied with whatever, which might actually last long enough for Sonya's last few minor errands to finish. Like clearing out of her hotel, shipping off the last few pieces of her truly immense book collection she kept finding yet more of in strange places, signing off the 'in trust' ownership of the schoolhouse from herself to her mother, and waiting near a phone line so those she sent off could check in with her once they were in her castle and didn't need anyone to worry.

Checking the clock behind her, the Lightning wondered just how long of a trip the flight between here and Genoa in Italy actually was.

Usov's family had left early-morning, to the point it could've been called pre-dawn. It was almost about lunch-time now. That was nearly eight hours, and while there was a bit of a drive at the end to reach an airport from the castle... surely the call from Adrik should be sometime soon.

She went through Mafia Land the time she followed that route herself. Hell of a lot faster, but she also slept through a good portion of the flight. Judging by civilian routes was a touch tricky if you weren't used to commercial flight times.

Sonya wordlessly came right back into the office suddenly, a slightly annoyed look plastered on her face.

"No good?" She honestly expected some kind of reaction to about fifty Rains attempting to Tranquilize the same target. A yawn, or something.

"It's a good idea. The execution... was less than ideal. And I begin to have an idea of why he is so against staying for at least another month or so until you're slated to leave." Lifting a shoulder in something approaching dismissiveness, but seemed more like confusion prompted than scorn, the younger thief simply shook her head. "They very nearly immediately got into a 'discussion' about whose job it was to start the whole thing not a second into trying to ambush me with it. Given the kid's immediate reaction was to put his head in his hands, I highly doubt that was the intent."

"Well, then they learned a valuable lesson." Galina offered after a moment of marveling how
horrifically galling that might've been. "Kids, am I right?"

All that planning, the practice, only to flub it when it really counted.

"…are Rains the only ones able to do that? Aside the Mists, that is."

"Other groups have tried." The head of the Lightning training section admitted blandly. "Using the fact we're more electrical than just simply fire-based energy, we did as well. But even then, when we can control it down to a measurable current and even when we use heavy duty resistors, more than one Lightning attempting to charge a battery will always result in exploding battery acid."

"…huh." The phone picked then to ring, and Sonya moved to answer it. "Go buy Larion the Rain, and his parents I suppose, the plane tickets he's going to need. Please."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 26th of April, 1970 continued. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Just couldn't help yourself, could you?"

Gedeon shot the snarky brunette a short look, only to pull himself up short when Pyotr pointedly coughed harshly. The still-standing Sovintnik turned his attention to his granddaughter, who did not look remotely pleased in the least at this unannounced visit.

Sonya slowly stubbed out the remains of the cigarette she had been smoking in a slightly overcrowded ashtray, then drew herself upright in the office chair to both sit properly and see her visitors clearly. "So fine. You're here. What the hell do you want now?"

"You really going to take that tone with me?"

"Go fuck yourself, Gedeon."

Very pointedly clearing his throat, because he wasn't the only one that protested this little idea of the new Zolotov Pahkan's but also the only one that knew both parties and wanted to ensure no one died in horrible fashions with the limited rank and leverage to ensure no one would die, the oldest man in the office could feel almost every single one of his seventy plus years when the youngest woman gave him an utterly flat stare down.

"Logistically speaking, Elisaveta now owns the schoolhouse... correct?"

His granddaughter, a freelance master thief, looked even less pleased by their presence now. "No. Lisa has the property to manage 'in trust' for a ghost identity. Legally speaking my Lackey still owns the land and he'll manage the finances connected to it. Including taxes, paying salaries, large purchases, and the like."

"Who is the base for the identity?" Pyotr questioned curiously, because this was part of his responsibility to nail the details down as well as likely telling for some of what she might be thinking.

"I am." Sonya admitted shortly. "Why?"

"Simply so I, or whomever takes my position, will not be blindsided by the information if it comes into question."

Her eyes slid to the younger vor behind him before she snorted. "Sure. Whatever you say."
"So... you're stealing clan property."

An utterly nasty smirk crossed the young blonde's lips. "Well... that is an interpretation. If the clan wanted to keep the school, perhaps you all should've ensured I couldn't buy it from the clan in the first place."

Gedeon shot Pyotr a look, only to gain a flat stare back for his troubles. "I do not control the sale of clan assets, if I may remind you."

He only really controlled and tallied intake, ensuring the vory and thieves paid into the clan's obshchak funds as they were charged with in return for the use of the clan's reputation and properties. He knew the land had been sold, but the derzhatel obschaka was the one in charge of fencing assets when withdrawals exceeded whichever limits he deemed acceptable.

He had hoped she would hand the property off to her mother, but then again unless she was only mildly annoyed she didn't tend to drown others in excess for the crime of asking something of her.

"And I bought it to protect my foster parents from interference, when it inevitably comes down to an idiot getting too big for his britches thinking he can interfere with an institute made with the intent of passing on obscure skill-related information to other structured organizations of our... type." Continued Sonya, almost idly than sarcastic. "Not simply just to fuck with your head, Gedeon. As I've told you before, the world doesn't revolve around you."

"...Milos knew this."

"Of course the old man knew. I told him almost a year ago." She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes, before glancing dismissively at the new Zolotov Pahkan. "Almost exactly a year ago now."

"The fact it would protect the clan-"

"Entirely coincidental." Dismissed the master thief with a smirk. "But... then again, Arseniy and Lisa are very much Zolotovs. As is my sister still, probably my baby brother in time."

Not a mention of him, alas.

Pyotr wouldn't take offense, mainly because it seemed she was waiting for someone to take offense at her behavior and less so because he hadn't been present in her life before he allowed Elisaveta to annoy and manipulate him into her desired family unit. His tardiness was his own fault, not hers.

To steal something for 'their own good' was an interesting justification to give.

Given it had to do with the esoteric Flame subject she was the best expert on, they would have to take her word for it until someone else had the experience to offer an opinion on the topic.

"It seems the militsiya aren't the only ones with a bad habit of never really asking questions of easily reached sources."

"If you hadn't co-opted the other-"

"Stop there, Gedeon. I have no reason to help you." Sonya rather rudely cut off the Pahkan shortly. "I'm not a Zolotov anymore, remember? Why the fuck would I let you have anything of mine?"

The younger man stepped past the Sovintnik, matching the Storm-Cloud with a glare. "You took the property under false pretenses."
"No, no I didn't. Yasha was entirely glad to sell me the excess property he could not ask the Sovintnik to turn into something profitable." She sneered back, naming the short form name of man who was the current derzhatel obschaka for the clan. "If you failed to ensure everyone in your syndicate was fully aware of what you wanted held back... well, that's your fuck up."

Apparently, Pyotr would need to train up a new one. Yakov likely would not keep his job in the face of a syndicate head trying to firm up grip on what had been just handed to him, unless he could somehow reason this away for the other man. "Gedeon, you had another reason to demand this meeting-"

"Furthermore." Interrupted the youngest woman very pointedly. "Neither Galina nor I are officially part of your clan anymore. Why the fuck is a Pahkan of a syndicate meeting with two unaligned freelancers like us, unannounced and without appropriate guards for your... station? With another high-ranking member of your syndicate as well?"

"You'll crawl back in short order."

Odd... particularly a strange claim when the Sun had confirmed he was well aware it was nearly impossible she would ever return to both him and Milos.

"I'd almost say you're adorably naïve... except I find nothing about you cute." Sonya refuted without blinking an eye. "If I hadn't promised your father... killing you right now would be really tempting."

Gedeon didn't entirely lack self-preservation, current situation being the exception. The reminder she was a hostile independent did at least slap a guarded expression on his face. "You need to name a replacement."

"Dmitriy."

"...for your position here-"

"Lisa."

"And the reason I'd accept any fucking recommendation coming out of your mouth?"

"Otherwise there won't be a Zolotov taking the 'head' of this operation." Allowed the Storm-Cloud in a painfully faked tone of mild pleasantness. "Because, again, I own this building and the school outright. I can shut it down, or at the very least kick your clansmen out. You can do whatever the fuck you think you want to do, so... get the fuck out of my face before I turn... belligerent."

"That would destroy what you've spent a full year working on." Gedeon countered shortly, well beyond the point of his temper was overtaking his common sense. "You wouldn't do that."

"Try me." Refuted the youngest in the room.

"Pahkan." Pyotr interrupted that before that could go anywhere. "You have other commitments."

"Yes, do run away." Sonya sneered wickedly, returning to her rather insolent reclined position she had been when the two of them entered the office with her boots stacked on the desk. "I'll see you on the international stage, Gedeon."

She very pointedly paid more attention to him than the new Zolotov Pahkan, so she missed his entire production of disdain and taking his leave on his 'own' terms. The Sovintnik remained in place, waiting out whatever stretch of time she wanted so much.
Eventually, Galina pulled a small little device he was somewhat alarmed to recognize as a cheap listening bug out from behind her only to hand it off to Sonya. Only for it to then be crushed between her fingers instead of allowed to transmit anything else said in the office.

"There's a set of Flame users Gedeon once tried to network into a functioning Flame-team." His granddaughter reported after a long moment of thoughtful study, making the bits of plastic and metal flake away in her own ruby red Flames she didn't tend to be recognized for using as much. "Noticeably, he doesn't talk or think about them. Because I challenged him to do it, and he utterly failed in an actually spectacular way. You find your position a touch difficult with such a younger man to ride herd on… you might want to catch up with one of them."

Very obviously, she was suggesting such to be as obstructionist as possible. A daily or even hourly reminder of a previous failure would make Gedeon a touch more eager to prove himself now Milos had let go of the clan. That didn't mean her bit of offered information wasn't useful, there might be something Pyotr could salvage from such a thing… perhaps even to replace himself now the next generation was taking over.

"You are aware he needs the fact he is unharmed after speaking to you to reinforce the impression that your leaving is a mutual more than hostile affair... correct?"

"I'm not that green, grandfather."

Sonya was, equally as pointedly, remaining in place instead of heading off to prevent the assumption from being drawn. When she had already *also* used the situation for her own aims, likely in response to the current difficulty she had with a disappearing teacher and the local law enforcement.

He inclined his head to her before turning to leave her territory. "If I never see you again, granddaughter... more than impressive."

"Well... at least a few of you have brains." After another moment, just before he shut the office door behind him, she spoke up again. "I'd bet on Lisa more than you, anyways."

"Fair enough."

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(Tuesday the 28th of April, 1970. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...I'm not going to disappear."

"Not the issue, sweetie." Lisa informed her pointedly, digging around under the kitchen sink to pull out the entirely illegal medical kit Sonya honestly had half-forgotten was stored there. That ended up stacked in her arms on top of a few volumes of books she had forgotten, and her mother had collected over the last month from whichever corners they ended up in. "Right now, even clansmen could attack you..."

"I've burned a hole into Moscow." The younger woman deadpanned pointedly, sliding the burden in her arms onto the dining table. "Piked heads left in random greenery. Lisa, the clansmen aren't that stupid. They wanted me to do all that to help shore up a cease-fire between them and another syndicate, meaning they know full well what targeting me will result in. The Khimki Cloud's reintroduction, his 'first' sighting."
"It's never the ones that know better, Nya. And that still leaves framing others for their own work."

A somewhat startling thump of heavy wood against more wood had both women turning to the vor, who had just set down a fairly significant crate of... yet more books she had forgotten about.

...given the dust caking the top, probably one of the very first crates she ever filled up way back in the day when she broke her hand.

Coughing sheepishly, she slid the entire pile on the table on top of the wooden container and then pretended more interest in her mother than her old man.

"I just want you to be careful." Lisa tried after a moment to control her expression, so her amusement wouldn't be so blatantly obvious to even the snacking Valera watching them from the kitchen table. "Being freelance isn't like your traveling or like how it was here. You eventually have to stop, and if it's not Mafia Land like your 'castle'..."

"I'm aware there will need to be an adjustment." Sonya allowed fairly. "As a matter of fact, the next three months will be nothing but getting used to no longer having a clan to fall back on in either reputation or territory while I stay in Italy for my brat's summer vacation. Just building up my own territory and keeping things nailed down."

"Good plan." Arseniy offered on his way past, dipping into the fridge for a bottle of beer to probably wash out whatever dust he had been disturbing in the attic to find that last box of books.

"That is a good plan. Okay." A slightly deeper breath, a second to exhale heavily, and the brunette tried for a more settled expression of something earnest. "Well... you always seemed to know what you were doing..."

"No. No, I never really did."

A very strange smile came over Lisa's face. "Just this once, sweetie. Lie to me."

"I know the future."

Snickering, the younger thief got a full body hug for a brief moment before she moved on to maybe sorting out something to eat for an early dinner. "When is your flight out, Nya?"

With a sheepish cough to go with her ignoring the proof she failed to clear out her book collection when asked, because she honestly hadn't intended to tell her mother that but at least she thought it was a lie as she asked for, the blonde seized on the change of topic gratefully. "In an hour and some change, I think I should have one last thing on top of even this. I'm just waiting on that, really."

Turning around instead of start in on making something to eat, Lisa reached out to bring Sonya's forehead to her own and smirked wryly at her. "Well, it's better than 'we're going to run away to join the Russian Circus'."

"Cherep wanted to." She defended herself, well aware how ridiculous their mother had found the younger foster siblings' 'initial' leave taking of home. Somewhat confused as to what this gesture was intended to do, the thief merely pressed gently back against the forehead against her own. "And besides, we did."

"That does not particularly help your case, Nya." Suddenly releasing the back of her neck, the older woman moved on to her fridge now that Arseniy wasn't rooting around in it for a particular brand of boot-leg beer.
Taking a draw from the brown glass bottle while Lisa used him as a particularly stable wall to lean against while she gathered ingredients, Arseniy scrubbed the palm of his left hand off on his button-down flannel shirt as he pointedly glanced at the box behind her. "Any last details to handle?"

"That seemed to have been the theme this whole week... and there's really only one thing I can think of right now." Aside... that stupid statue in the desk drawer she hoped Dmitriy wouldn't ask questions about. "The Wolfpack Gang's Cloud might ask you to arm him."

"...should I? Can I, without screwing us over when it comes to your... related skills?"

"There's a knife in the topmost left-hand drawer of the desk in the Flame Office." Sonya reported thoughtfully. "It's a makeshift glass knife, with small sapphire shards embedded in it. If the kid comes to you, give him that."

Larion's assassin knife, in the hands of a very pissed off Cloud wanting some revenge, should at the very least help Vasilyev carve a very bloody furrow into those he found distasteful. It technically was hers, since the young Rain hadn't asked for it back, and thus hers to decide who received it next.

As she sure as fuck didn't need knives, if it could help the kid then it could go to him. The rest of her weaponry was either of a size too small or very fucking far away.

Lisa, who had seen first-hand the results of a Cloud testing a sapphire before, shot her a raised eyebrow from over her shoulder.

Sonya smiled thinly back at her. "It shouldn't take him long to figure it out, and what it would be good for."

"Can it be traced?"

"No." Larion made it himself, from what Galina informed her after she had dealt with the kid's issues.

He had to have, given that was still at the point Usov and Anna were controlling everything about the Flame training regime from any interested parties, so only the Flame users themselves would be aware that sapphires were highly reactive to the point of being dangerous to them.

At least she did remember to have Pierre-Antoine Carpentier's last letter to no one shipped to Italy, even if she forgot everything else the long-dead Storm had packed away in a hidden cubby located in his childhood home.

Which raised an interesting thought... who put it there, if the ancient Storm Arcobaleno wrote the papers on his deathbed or near to the time of his death?

Arseniy set down his beer bottle, more than slightly distracted with what was going on outside the kitchen's front-facing window. "Does your one last thing have anything to do with the police?"

"Shockingly enough, yes. Predictable fuckers." Sonya glanced down and back to the last crate of things she had to have shipped, then tried for a non-awkward smile for her mother. "Lisa, can you ship this for me? I don't think I have the time to do it myself."

"Mmm... have fun, sweetie."
Adrik knocked on the surprisingly solid door somewhat sharply. "Sorry to wake you, but there's a household meeting down the hall a bit. Meet and greet type, and everyone needs to be there."

The greenette that opened the back hall's fourth bedroom door did indeed have a deeper color of plant-like green rather than Verde's slightly more acidic coloring. He offered the definitely married mother with deep green hair a wry smile, shifting to include the little brunette son peeking blearily around her hip.

"Sorry and all that, I know a few of you are suffering jet-lag at the very least. But I'm the head of domestic security, and I do at least need your names to distribute keys and the like." He effortlessly lied through his teeth, because he could damn well do it without their awareness or permission... but he'd have to live with these people for at least a year.

"Bring your husband. If these rooms will suit you, the kid can pick his own, I can get you the key to the locks."

"Alright, I-" cutting herself off, the mom slightly frowned down at her son who ducked past her to eyeball the older Russian suspiciously, "Larion!"

"Who are you?"

"Before your time, kid. Tatiana, Sonya's older sister, was my gang leader when we were about a few years older than you." And fuck was that depressing, he was getting old. "I'm paying back a favor, which is why I'm only going to be here a year or so."

"...young man."

"It's alright, ma'am. Good instincts, at least. I am part of the clan and all." Adrik waved the possible rebuke on his behalf away. "I wouldn't have let you in if Sonya hadn't told me you were coming, but it's not like he could've known that if she didn't tell you who all was here already."

The young kid still gave him the evil eye, apparently more out of protectiveness for his mom and the dad he hadn't really seen more than a glimpse of letting them into the grounds last night, so he just gave the two-possibly-three a short wave before turning on his heel. "Trust me, you can't miss us. We're on the landing right outside the master's bedroom, it at least has the seating set up right now."

"We'll be right there." The second mother in residence assured him quickly, tugging her bedraggled son back into the bedroom.

That was two doubles and five singles... this floor was already filled up and he barely had any actual personnel to work with. The guy now living out of the only occupied room on the third floor aside, because he was such a damn unknown even he didn't know his own name, Adrik now had eight other people to somehow manage.

At least they could move the older Sun guy upstairs, instead of needing him to sleep on the cots still in the ground floor coat closets.

There would be an additional eight more in as little as a month, then there would also be the delightful complication of day-shift workers.
"...shit, you. I forgot to count you. That's ten of us and not nine."

"I'm rather unsurprised." Admitted the tired-looking blond guy, lurking near the banks of windows that lit this loft-landing area just outside the master's suite. "I take it the room I got 'assigned' is going to someone else?"

"If you don't mind. You can move in to the connected suite on the other side of the Storm Guy and share his bathroom, at least until Verde can move to his home and the married groups can move to their own places down the drive a way. The new group has a kid, they might want the connecting room we thought would be for guests for him."

"We need to give the Storm Guy a name." Peter 'Scruffy' McScruffy announced dryly, with a shake of his head. "Boss lady will nickname him 'Hawk' or 'Blankslate McGee' if we don't."

Adrik snorted, then practically inhaled spit when a voice made the other man jump rather comically.

"I heard that." Said nameless Storm drawled as he ambled up the left-hand staircase that connected this floor to the ground floor, a somewhat vexed scientific Lightning trailing after him reluctantly. "Hawk I wouldn't mind, 'Blankslate McGee' is a bit much Sun man."

"...you might as well call me Scruffy, or Peter."

"McScruffy." Rather snottily corrected the in-residence Mist, somehow without sounding like a complete bratty child doing so, appearing and dropping down to the built-in bench around a support pillar in the middle of this landing. "And I am Usov! The other child is Larion the Rain."

"Sure." Allowed the former cutpurse, unsure if he should buy into the childishness or if it was as false as his instincts insisted. "So you've got your parents, and they've come with jobs, but does the Rain's parents have any?"

A sudden shift in seriousness wasn't something he had been counting on, but half expecting given Viper's general mood-swings when being toyed with by Tatiana. Usov's dark brown eyes gleamed with dark indigo colors for a split second. "No, they weren't exactly... planned on."

...so, what?

Was Sonya just throwing people into the castle to flesh out the staff in resident?

He would appreciate others to speak his native language to, maybe that had something to do with it?

Adrik couldn't really see why they were all here, aside some having a mystical fire-based ability and related family. The one calling the shots probably had an idea, and his job was just to ensure they remained alive for a year so perhaps he should get on that. "Right so... Mist mom and dad on their way over?"

The child pointed over the opened balcony across the main floor staircases to the pair heading down the hallway past the third-floor staircase.

The Rain family would probably need another few moments, especially as Rain mom looked to have been just woken up when he knocked.

"So," he started, because there was something he could think of to start off with and wouldn't need the other half of the people here to decide, "I think we should maybe reserve this floor for 'family'. Or to the point right now, those waiting to move out to the houses being built down the drive a little way. Then probably guest rooms after that. Yes, Verde, that includes you too. You're staying put for
"a few months."

The Frenchman merely cocked an eyebrow at him, because right now Adrik was in the room directly next to his.

As Sonya had informed him, the second floor had seven bedrooms and four baths. What she hadn't said was that only the master's bath had only one bedroom connected to it, the rest on the floor was nestled between three sets of two bedrooms. He had the sneaking suspicion it was the same for the floors above, eight bedrooms and four baths shared between paired rooms would sort of make sense. Currently, the scientist had a corner room at one end of the second floor's back hallway.

Which would mean, as that was only three levels, that the fourth and fifth 'tower' part of the top of the castle had four bedrooms and likely two bathrooms each. Then there was the 'three bedrooms' on the ground floor, one of which needed some construction to separate into two offices and the other two were those closets right next to the main doors just down the flanking staircases behind him.

"Third floor's ballroom, I believe will likely be turned into a library given how many books we have already. Which would then give us somewhere to put all the bookcases we're being sent, aside wherever we can stick them." Which, given what Tatiana could certainly inform anyone who asked, might actually not contain the boss lady's entire book collection. It was odd the crates holding tall bookcases weren't labeled as coming from a Mafia Land connected port, but they had Italian addresses so it was possible Björn could be calling in locally owned carpenter shops. He was still inspecting them anyways, but it was interesting to note and maybe ask about eventually. "Which leaves two common rooms on this floor open to be dedicated for something."

"Would Sonya want them for anything?" Inquired the Sun as Usov's parents joined the men.

"As she's got both a ballroom-sized library about to be assembled and her own master bedroom to cover in books, I highly doubt it." Adrik deadpanned, because they had seven crates of books already, and from what the Lackey at Mafia Land said… that wasn't remotely half of it. Worst of all, more books were being pulled out of half-forgotten places. "Unless you can think of something her brat would like."

"If you want to reserve at least the back four bedrooms for us," Mist mom suggested, with a small and slightly tired as she and her husband picked a makeshift crate bench under a window to settle for the meeting, "how about a sitting room in the open room between the bedrooms?"

"That's... not a bad idea, Mrs...?"

"Samuila. I am Zinaida, and this is Maximillian. Usov is our son."

"The bookkeeper and the... bee lady."

"...yes, yes that works." Zinaida confirmed after a moment to look taken aback, fighting the smirk trying to steal across her lips. "Speaking of bees...? I need a lot of wood to start with."

"Right. For now, will crates work?" Given they had resorted to making sitting areas of nothing but shipping containers, they had more than enough to spare.

"Crates will work as long as I can cut them apart. The faster the better, I have to find the bees this spring or wait until next year, and the spring is almost over."

"We have more than enough of those for you to make an immediate start with." Turning to the lady's husband, Adrik pointed down and a bit further back in this massive castle. "Down past the dining hall and the kitchen in a back-hall affair is a backroom office. It's going to be split in two somewhat
soon, I think one of those is supposed to be yours for tracking the household finances. At the very least, it's where we've been sticking the receipts and the like for what we've bought in the way of furniture already."

"I'm... not all that familiar with foreign currencies." Maximillian observed slowly, obviously already calculating out what needed to be bought in a fast hurry due to the unexpected family addition only now hastening down the main hallway to them. "As a matter of fact, I'm not entirely sure about my ability to speak the native language."

"Native currency is lira, or euros. Language, mainly through your son, is going to be managed one way or another. Take Verde with you shopping too, he's a human calculator." Jerking a thumb at the mildly annoyed Lightning, because yes it would constrain him away from hunting through the boss lady's book collection for anything Flame-related he was sure the woman wouldn't ship through the civilian channels anyways, he turned to the three just joining them. "So, as we're all here, introductions? I'm Adrik, the head of security."

"Tolmachyova Ruslana, my husband Afanasii, our son Larion." The female greenette mustered a slightly sheepish smile for them as she and her husband lingered closer to the bannister than get as close as the other family unit. "We apologize for the rather abrupt imposition."

Scuffy, the man they rather turfed out of his room to ensure they could be close by to the 'extra' room their son would take, merely waved a hand to dismiss that. "I think us 'singles' are going to be a level up more. So, you may as well stay on this one until the housing project out in the front courtyard is done."

"That's Peter McScruffy, or just Scuffy, Verde's the other green guy behind him." A moment spent ensuring the guy wouldn't mind before Adrik pointed at the so-far nameless Storm. "That's Hawk, he's likely to take over for me if he doesn't find anything else to do. Samuila Zinaida, a... groundskeeper, her husband Maximillian who tracks the finances, and son Usov. Being said, boss lady would appreciate if you pitched in somewhere. We've got a lot to cover with little hands to do so, so if you can pick up something in short order we'd all appreciate it."

Ruslana very pointedly glanced around at the ten of them standing there, and the two kids paying attention still. "How many more are we expecting, and do they have anything tasked?"

"I know of one more lady we're expecting shortly." He looked down to the young two boys, the Mist using one.

Usov cracked a slightly demented grin for everyone that followed his gaze. "The Mirror Lady. She had to go check in on one of the Mists that went international, depending on what she finds will dictate how long it takes for her to arrive."

"Aside her, there's Galina and Sonya herself. The kid she's moving here for. And then-" 

"Miss Mingxia and Master Yaozu." Scruffy chipped in thoughtfully. "As far as I know. Unless, there's more like young Mister Tolmachyov lurking around waiting to be picked up."

Larion the Rain coughed sheepishly, darting a glance at his so-far silent father who had a very pensive look to his slightly scarred up face.

"...well, that's two floors worth of people, and no cooks."

"I can cook some simple things." Rain mom offered after a moment. "Admittedly, not for a vast number with more than that. But at least until there is a dedicated cook, I can keep us all fed."
"Well good, otherwise you'd be stuck with what minimal things I can make." Still, that was… what?

Seven bedrooms on this floor and eight overhead, and fourteen people assigned to twelve rooms already. Then the Lackey, who probably would only half-live out of wherever they stuck him but still would probably appreciate a lower-level room.

…and this was the week of getting people in. Another week like this, and the entire castle would be packed already.

He did count himself in that, right?

"Well, then… no packages are to be brought higher than the ground floor until either I, Hawk, or Usov can inspect them. I've got keys to the doors, but you might want to test them a few times to be sure they're to be your keys to the rooms. There's food in the fridges but clean up after yourself and make less mess for Mrs. Tolmnychova. Alright?" When no one could think of something to ask or say, Adrik rubbed the heel of his hand against the healed gunshot through his ribcage. "Right, well… there's a lot of books to unpack and bookcases to assemble, so unless you know of an issue that needs immediate correction… pitch in. Please."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 29th of April, 1970 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"He is both here and not."

"That's not particularly clear, Mirror Lady." Sonya observed after a moment when she didn't clarify.

Anna tilted her head to the side, not looking away from one of her fellow's unconscious bodies. "He is himself, still. But not himself in reality."

She glanced backwards at her sister, but from Tatiana's completely baffled expression she had no idea either.

Anna wasn't the first Mist consulting for Sergei's situation, but she was probably one of the most experienced the Russian elements present could present. As the Storm-Cloud couldn't get away with separating Usov from his family for a day or two when they were moving to her home, she couldn't bring in the more powerful Mist for at least a few more weeks.

"Can or is there a way to make Igor himself again?" Questioned the nurse after a moment to stare at her blankly.

Slim fingers flexing around the hand mirror held almost defensively in front of her, probably since she left Moscow for a hostile place like a floating island of criminals, before Anna actually shifted since the sisters entered the long-term recovery room.

"…perhaps." Actually turning around as well, the younger brunette gave the older women a slight smile. "I can light a path that might work, and assist, but there will be some consequences regardless. He will never quite fit in his own skin again, not after so long disassociated with it."

"So… he's going to have to 'puppet' himself?"

"I… suppose you could think of it that way." The only conscious Mist allowed after a moment of blank staring. "There is nothing to puppet, as it is himself and the source of what he is. It's just… a few things will require conscious effort instead of happening naturally. He unlearned it while not needing to waste the energy on unconscious systems while so disassociated with himself, reminding
"him may take an amount of time."

"Whoo boy." Huffed the professional nurse, a grimace of distaste crossing her face for a moment. "Yeah, okay. I can kind of see that."

"I can't. Anna, what the hell do you mean? Are you talking to Igor?"

"I am. Eyes are the window to the soul, and windows are reflective." Glancing down in the hand mirror she carried, the thief honestly didn't know when the younger woman acquired it, Anna examined whatever it showed her critically before looking back up. "The longer things drew out, the more 'Igor' cut from himself to conserve his self enough to be rescued. Of the unnecessary cut from himself, was bodily functions after enough time. He is attempting to describe things 'delicately', I don't care for the evasion."

"Yeah, I can see why. We kind of need to know these things."

"Doesn't the body still know what to do?" Sonya interrupted somewhat impatiently, very pointedly glancing down at the prone and still breathing body on the berth.

Tatiana held up a hand, as if speaking an aside although she didn't bother lowering her voice. "Catheters, baby sis. Just leave it there."

"The taught parts of civilized life were certainly left behind, as they were the easiest to cut away without harming himself." Allowed the Mist, her eyes trained on the ceiling. "The heart will beat, the body will breathe, but controlling his own body is… likely something he requires to relearn."

"…I have some skills in that." The younger sister allowed slowly, glancing between the other women. "From controlling the first fitful starts of my strength…"

"Just… leave us the Mirror Lady for a few days."

"Fine. Thank you, Anna. We appreciate it." Not immediately leaving for the very next thing she had to get done, which was gathering up the rest of the books she had somewhere in Mafia Land to be shipped somewhere central and actually get an idea of how many fucking things there were, the blonde's hesitation drew the other's attentions. "Just… what does 'never fit in his own skin again' supposed to mean, then?"

"…he will likely spook every sensitive near him. He is more and less than what he was when being forcibly ejected from his own body, and some including highly intelligent animals can tell there is something strange." Anna shifted in a way that both suggested a shrug and a tiny tinge of impatience. "Then again, all Mists cause the same in various amounts. Some can just tell we aren't 'normal', and we… do not 'get along' with more intelligent animals without dedicated assistance or taking the time to accustom them to us."

"So… say a young Mist boy wants a dog?"

The Mirror Lady's expression shifted to earnestly intent, as if she and her sister hadn't caught the previous shift in her demeanor. "Ah… yes. That will require some finesse. Were you thinking a young puppy or an older dog?"

"Younger." Renato had said they weren't born yet, so the thought probably was they'd get the dogs after being weaned from their mother. "You and Usov should be present when it happens."

"We will be on our toes, then." Anna promised, instead of saying there shouldn't be an unexpected complication.
Sonya sighed heavily. "Well… fuck, then."
Chapter 3

(Thursday the 30th of April, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Screeching klaxons started blaring over whatever her sister had put on for her post-work shift relaxation informed the two in the apartment that another invasion attempt was going on. Sonya winced at the earsplitting noise but didn't look up from checking the pages of each and every book she was attempting to pack up from her semi-illegal collection that would have to remain here… and what was looking like a solid third that would have to be left here until suitable bolt holes could be made for illegal or questionable material.

Tatiana swearing somewhat nastily did cause her to look up, halfway done with paging through the treatise on the possible properties of and used for ‘free-range’ electricity Nikola Tesla wrote. "... Tats?"

"I wanted to go shopping." With a disgusted huff, the nurse instead exited from her bedroom and aimed her path to join the younger sister on the couch. "All the general merchants probably now bailed the hell out for the day, and the rest of the night. I've tried before, only the weapons and luxury goods sellers will bother remaining open now the whole island's going to be high on violence."

"What did you need?"

"Not need… I wanted to test out more shoes." Flexing her toes before her and resting them on the lip of the crate she was packing up with the books deemed 'less risky to have' in civilian settings, she leaned sideways to rest half her weight on her. "Which reminded me, who the hell makes your boots? You're always wearing them and making little pouty faces when you have to wear something else."

"Why the hell do you want to know?"

"Do you know how long I'm on my feet? Hours and hours. And I'm looking to add yet more on top of it where I can't walk around to relieve the stress on my knees or ankles." Tatiana finally leaned fully over to the point she was practically on top of Sonya, obstructing everything she was aiming to do this afternoon while waiting on Anna to finish with Sergei's situation. "You travel the world, getting stuck into situations or making them, and yet you don't peel off your footwear the moment you can somewhere safe. So obviously, your boots are better than anything manufactured you can find. Gimme."

She snorted at her sister, glancing pointedly down at her own bare feet. Admittedly she hadn't yet found a reason to go anywhere today, and it was likely with an invasion going on she wouldn't until tomorrow.

"Nya… baby sister… please?"

As the plea was accompanied by a generous smothering by breasts not her own, she found it particularly ineffectual. "Is there a reason why you're half on top of me?"

"It's a hug, without the 'constraining arms' issue you find so distasteful." Admitted the redhead with a wicked grin, stretching out a touch more just to pin down the younger woman fully as Sonya started wiggling out of her hold without damaging her book. "See?"
"If I say yes, will you stop-?" The phone ringing had both sisters startling, and after a moment it rang again so Tatiana bounced off her to answer it.

They both probably had been half-expecting some kind of explosion or noise signaling the invasion attempt reaching the deeper residential area. There wasn't any real regulations or requirements in the rental agreement copy her sister had held on to so she could see what they had to do as residents here, probably because trying to tell contrary criminal types any kind of rules to hold to would mean it would be immediately broken trying to see what consequences there would be or if they'd get caught at all.

If the fighting got this far, it was pretty much up to the residents themselves if they'd get involved or not. More often than not they would, but mostly out of self-centered selfishness than altruism for anyone that might not be up to fighting-fit trying to lay low.

"It's for you, Nya."

Sliding off the couch curiously, Galina and Adrik both had the number for the apartment but she wasn't expecting anything from either corner of the world to happen this soon after last hearing from them, she gingerly took the receiver of their monstrosity of a wall mounted phone that was attached to the kitchen wall with those curly spring cord which only went a foot away from the mount at best.

Next were the long cords, then the wireless sets. Frankly, right now she was mildly suspicious the clunky thing would just short out if a fly landed on the thick plastic. It was a cheap knock-off brand, but it did work… most of the time.

"What?"

"Dama, I need a small bit of help." Bjorkn's voice was a little tinny, and she could've sworn the kid had not planned on going further than Body Avenue today so he shouldn't need any kind of backup unless the fighting got to where he was already. "I am… uh, stuck here while the invasion is going on."

…point. "With what?"

"In the bookcase in my room is all the shop inventory books you've stolen since… I guess when you started stealing?" The Lightning-Storm hurried on before Sonya could actually comprehend she still had more illegal books in places she hadn't been aware of, with a nervous little cough. "In them, if you can find a… um… Meissen porcelain tea cups?"

"…why are we looking for them?"

"If you can find it, I can tie off another medium range contract without actually bothering you to steal it." He informed her, which would be really rather helpful if he could pull whatever this was off. "I've only been able to do two like this before, matching them to various inventory lists you have since you never seem to miss taking those books too. That painting one right after your work in France, for example."

She almost started walking to see if she could find yet more books, only to remember just at the last second the phone was firmly attached to the wall and doing so would do a bit of damage to both the apartment and the clunky thing next to her ear. "Um… what am I looking for? Just 'cups'?"

"Maker marks that should either be a pair of crossed, curved swords… or more preferably the initials K. P. M. over the pair of crossed swords. If there's dots or stars or anything is apparently not desired, nor a block manufacturer's mark. If the mark's thin and unadorned no, but if it's wide and
"unadorned yes."

"…that makes little sense."

She could almost hear the cringe. "Forgive me, Dama, but seventeen to eighteen hundred maker marks are somewhat random. It is entirely possible there won't be one, or one mark can be mistaken for something used two hundred years before. Less specific is a 'red bud' style of blue bulb, or onion, pattern Meissen porcelain tea cups. Which… would not make much sense to you either… and I'm assuming there is a mention and not just descriptions or lot numbers…"

"How about I fetch the books, then bring them to you?" Sonya suggested, somewhat annoyed that she was confused as he suggested she would be.

He couldn't bring the contract here to check against the details supplied for general knowledge, as it was against any Guild Hall's rules regarding the contracts they accepted by proxy for the freelancers using it as a contact point. Try to remove them from the building without accepting it, and everyone would try to put holes through your head.

Which left her suggestion, unless they wanted to tie up the phone lines for a few good hours and get charged exorbitantly for it.

…she could not wait for the digital age to catch up already.

There were problems in the digital age, yes. As much as the conveniences would smooth away the communication issues she had faced rather recently it would also cause as much complications to occur. Faster travel just meant bigger disasters when something failed, instant communication just meant you'd hear of every disaster happening world-wide instead of local achievements that knitted a township or village societies together more as a whole, more options for completing the same tasks enabled just as many ways to screw another over in the process. Or screw up yourself, as the case may be.

It'd be nice to not worry about tying up physical phone lines, and being charged an arm and a leg to do it, if she wanted to speak to her mother in Moscow while in Italy.

Faxing photocopies of the information would've prevented her from needing to walk the distance in the middle of an invasion attempt, but commercial fax machines weren't in widespread use just yet. Faxing, the act of transmitting reports or images via more often by radio waves or sometimes electrical currents, was known of… and used more in military and scientific operations than anything else. Phone line variations were in the process of being slimmed down so she knew they did exist, but a forty-six-pound machine that was the commercial variant was still a bit more bulk than she wanted to bother with getting for the convenience when she knew desktop variants were still coming.

She'd have to install it, or them, where they'd have to go to be of use. Then in a year or two do it all over again when something better suited for her or her Lackey's work came commercially available.

She didn't feel like it.

Bjørn had basically made a bunch of nonsense sounds as he stalled for time while she had gone down memory lane, eventually culminating into a humming sound that was on the edge of desperate. "…Dama, there's an invasion."

"Yeah, I can hear it." Like anyone could miss the sound of open-warfare popping off both in the distance from the apartment and in the background behind his slightly tinny voice.
He was closer to it, too.

"Well," drawled out her Lackey, stretching out the word a touch longer than strictly necessarily, "if you don't mind... I can at least give a warning to everyone else..."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing! Just... nothing. I would appreciate if you would bring the inventory books, greatly. This contract has been bouncing around the Guild Hall for almost a year now and is about to be defaulted on. Getting it solved would earn a bonus given how many times it's been passed on."

"Fine then. Want me to grab anything else?" Sonya questioned, letting the shifty behavior slide because it wouldn't be worth it to poke the Icelander into telling her why he turned hesitant if he was confident enough to ask her to waste that much time on a phone.

She likely already knew. It probably had to do with that lingering reputation from the previous Mafia Land Cloud, and why a lot of the vendors on the island were never really pleased to see her. Her Lackey was a lot more sensitive to that social pressure bullshit than she was, being the one most looked to just to buffer them and her.

"...um, something to eat?" Bjørn suggested somewhat sheepishly.

Well, with what her sister said about the usual antics the merchants got up to when the rest of the island indulged in a bit of consequence-free violence, it was entirely likely the restaurants wouldn't be open until well after the bars had taken whatever edge off.

"Fine. Barring anything going strange, I will be there in fifteen." Hanging up, she turned slightly only to get a raised eyebrow from her sister standing still close enough to eavesdrop on the entire conversation and bar the direct path to the kitchen's fridge. "...what?"

"I'll make Bjørn something to eat, you go find your extra books."

"I'm pretty sure I can make a damn sandwich without killing someone."

The smirk that slid across Tatiana's face was entirely wicked as she pointedly didn't move out of the way. "Not according to our pops, he said you can't. And I'd take Arseniy's word over yours any day, especially in this topic."

"...he's not dead, is he?"

"I'll make something fast for your poor Lackey. You go find your books, Nya." With what probably should've been a sympathy pat on the shoulder that turned into something pandering, her older sister turned to their fridge and walked off before she could think up of a counter.

Her last attempt at a horseradish sauce had not turned out that bad... if you really liked spicy foods. With enough milk it was entirely edible.

...she should probably actually look up recipes before trying again, but she and Arseniy ate it just fine!

Then again, Lisa had taken two sniffs of the chunky sauce and dumped it down the drain when she thought the younger thief hadn't been looking. Maybe next time she shouldn't use a whole clove of garlic, and possibly half as much vinegar?

Probably twice as much mayonnaise as well. It had turned out weird, yes. Not inedible.
…would Fong like it?

He was the only one she had ever seen that seemed to like having all the taste buds in his mouth chemically burned off. That spicy tofu stuff he took off her had been almost as spicy.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 30th of April, 1970 continued. Thieves Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

Bjørn had done the bare minimum anyone asked for, in warning that his patron was on her way when there were 'difficulties' going on.

Body Avenue wasn't exactly far from the main transport hub for the island with it being part of the general day-services, a lot of the traffic going through here was involved with. Most criminal syndicates invading for whichever aim generally made specific use of the port and airstrip complex first before kicking off whichever unpleasantness they were after once all their people were on the island.

From the sounds of it, this group had picked to do the same as most others. Starting from the port and spreading out to the first major trade area of the island. Which, logistically, was a sort of good idea discounting the weapon vendors stacked down the 'main' main street just waiting for them… and except any 'sensitive' positions in the general running of Mafia Land was built into the faked volcano smack in the middle of the manmade landmass. Almost a kilometer inland, and from the docksides straight through not only the entertainment complex most spent their hard-earned money in but within walking distance to both the residential and physical training heavy sections of the island's available services.

Which… did mean to get from the residential section of the island to Body Avenue and the Guild Halls lining a street fairly close to the 'coastline' one would have to pass through some of the ongoing open warfare trying to go in that direction, if you didn't go around the fake volcano and through the windbreak bamboo forest covering that 'north' side. All that was only if a thief of his lady's skills hadn't gotten into the underground even in the residential sections, which were supposed to be closed off once the alarms sounded and merely connect certain streets together but otherwise close off to manageable chunks for later re-securing.

On the other hand, with eleven heavy inventory books tracking the acquisition and sale of trinkets from across the world in hand and hopefully something Tatiana had made to eat on top of that, she might be overburdened with unwieldy things too much to deem it a viable course of action for her trip.

Eventually telling that to the head of the Thieves Guild near about the time she should arrive earned him an entirely flat and hostile stare down.

"All you requested was-"

"Now." Alvah Pirbright interrupted irritably, a short and almost violent gesture to the spotty cracks of residual gunfire still popping off in the near-distance. "You called her over now?"

Bjørn waved a specific vanilla folder under his nose pointedly in return. "You asked for this. I won't know if we can or not within your time limit until I check with her hoarded information for leads."

They both, and everyone else located in the lobby just in case it was one of the Guild Halls these invaders were seeking to take over or take hostage, looked up as the building and a significant portion of the fake island shook from some distant explosion. He'd almost say grenades, those
weren't too unusual here, but it could easily be an RPG instead.

"The more you buy into that 'reputation' of monstrous behavior from Clouds, the more she's going to hate dealing with you and you risk what you fear." He reminded the much older man once it was certain the ceiling wouldn't be collapsing in on them. "You've talked to her before, she didn't murder you then. And, frankly, she had cause to." "I am more than old enough to no longer relish taking my own life in my hands like that," Pirbright dismissed with a heavy sigh and a scowl just for the Lightning-Storm Lackey standing next to him, "when it is necessary is one thing. When it is not is another." He ruthlessly suppressed the desire to face palm.

That was exactly the issue Sonya had with other people's behavior around her. "This is Mafia Land. You risk your life every day among those with worse tempers and automatic weapons wandering through the streets. My Dama is more likely to rob you blind than murder for offenses. She's done that before with those that annoyed her enough. If your complaint is you are likely to lose your wallet you might have cause to behave 'strangely' around her, not just simply fearing she will murder you for no reason."

"We do not need the added risk of destabilizing-"

"There's idiots tossing military grade ordinance around at moving targets, and your main concern is her?"

"Added to what is already-"

"She knows!"

"...'knows' what?" Sonya asked herself, a near-dozen books balanced on one hand and her other wrapped around something wrapped itself in butcher's paper, kicking the supposedly securely locked underground access tunnel's door shut with a booted heel. Given the blood on the left boot toe, Bjorn would bet she hadn't gotten into the underground until after she ran into something she didn't appreciate getting in her face. He'd also bet a significant amount of the euro account that she had eavesdropped for a moment before letting herself in. "Thank you, Dama."

"Quick question," the newly arrived thief interposed blandly into the awkward silence, dropping the books at her feet to hand over the quick lunch he had asked for and it seemed her sister had made for him, glancing back pointedly to the only remaining boss she had left, "how many times would you allow someone to slight you to your face before you deem it an offense to murder another over?"

Instead of waiting for the older man to answer her apparently rhetoric question, she turned to him fully next. "Those books will be returned, yes?"

"I am not that suicidal, Dama." Even if they were only useful once in a blue moon, given her total unamused features when he suggested getting rid of anything papery near her... he knew better. He knew so much better he instead had bookcases in his own room she was free to fill up. "I will take them back personally."

She left the inventory books on the floor, even if one corner of the bottom most was dipped in the
tiny crescents of blood she was leaving behind where she walked.

"...the invaders are in the underground tunnels." Björn realized, critically examining the blood and how red it was.

That was freshly spilled, not more than a few minutes old. It wasn't clotting nor very dark, so probably tracked in right outside. Which likely contributed to why Sonya picked to enter the conversation even if she loathed these kinds of discussions happening about her.

The thief closest to the door the blonde just opened pried it ajar to take a peek at his words, only to hurriedly pull back his close shaven head before it could be filled with lead. "They cut the bars!"

"They had a Storm for the bars," corrected the Storm-Cloud loudly over a shoulder, "he is not going to be a problem anymore. Which is why they are all so... salty. I can fit through the gap he made before I got here, they cannot. Well... not yet. If they have one, they likely have more, so...? Have fun with that."

Alvah Pirbright turned on a highly polished heel to the main desk of the Thieves' Guild Hall, and the phone line connecting straight to security, to inform others as those thieves that got caught in the Hall shifted to refocus their heaviest hitters to focus on the supposedly secured backdoor to the building.

His patron picked one of the abandoned lobby couches to sprawl out on, settling in to apparently wait out the end of the invasion and the end of the lockdown of critical island functions.

The Lightning-Storm figured he might as well follow her example and set up down here to work, picking up the significantly heavy stack of books to set on the coffee table she had her boots stacked on already. She did at least thoughtfully press down on her side of the low table when the book stack threatened to tip the wood over, at least long enough for him to redistribute the bound paper in less risky configurations.

Sonya plucked the contract in question off the stacks to peruse while he sorted out which inventory books to start in on, making an aggravated hum after a moment. "I know that date..."

"...Dama?"

"Fong was with me, we were turning his Triad's contract with me in because the asshole wouldn't clear off until I at least got the bullet wounds I received on the job checked out. This is a Sky's contract, this same day we both felt a particularly rude one attempting to manage an entire hall full of criminals without even introducing themself." An almost breathless huff of irritation, a sharp cough to loosen whatever had gotten stuck in her lungs, and the thief he worked for tossed the file back on his lap dismissively. "No wonder there's a bonus for doing it when such are normally just canceled out instead if there's no takers."

It would explain what the head of the Guildhall was doing asking around personally about if anyone could take the contract within the time limit allowed. "Should I pass on this...?"

"Eh, if you can do it out of those books you might as well. I don't see a reason why not." She refuted slowly with an absent shrug. "Rude ass Sky... probably European for at least trying something instead of remaining in the background under notice. If that helps what you're looking for any."

It did, actually. Porcelain patterns differed widely in popularity depending on region they were available, and the request didn't explicitly say what pattern was desired aside the apparently rare as hell additional dot of color. This was all assuming Skies across the world weren't exactly the same, which he doubted either of them could answer unless she had met a Chinese Sky.
Although getting what patterns were widely popular enough someone wanted cups to replace broken ones in a heirloom set from somewhere like Mafia Land out of the information brokers would be expensive. Especially as it wasn't entirely applicable what one expert would like, as it was the contractor's view on the subject who was important in the end.

This was starting to become way too difficult… but he already started it. Might as well finish.

If he was lucky, he wouldn't be able to find a matching entry in the books and drop the entire subject as just a touch too hard. Whatever help getting one or two knocked off the final total she had to do for them by year's end, and even if he could use the hard cash getting things set up in her castle by the time she wanted it.

"Is the Storm man dead?" First thing first, Bjørn carefully unwrapped the submarine sandwich and delicately gave it a cautious sniff. Even if that made the woman seated across the couch flatly glare a hole in the side of his head.

He heard the rumors, he didn't want to find out firsthand exactly how badly she could cook. Of course, he'd eat it anyways even if she did make it.

He was part Storm, not stupid.

"No. He's… suffering from a temporary concussion." At his skeptical look, she gave him the second flat stare down of the afternoon. "And is currently suspended from a rope over something nice and deadly. As long as he doesn't do anything else stupid, he'll live."

The Lightning-Storm hummed an acknowledgement, calculating out how many in the room would know her native Russian and heard that.

It probably wouldn't really help in the short-term, but the long… the more little bits of evidence he could build up the more she would be bothered less.

As long as it had nothing to do with her cooking.

(\textbf{Friday the 1st of May, 1970. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.})

"Good morning." Primakova Elisaveta outright purred with a wicked grin, to the damn near visible consternation of the same militsiya officer that had been harassing her daughter for the week she spent in-country. "Can I help you?"

Galina settled in against the wall to watch this go down, interested in how the aims of mother and daughter differed in application in this situation. Sonya hadn't remotely cared, as long as the man did his job and got out of her face. What would Lisa do in her place?

After a moment to adjust to the change in situation, the law enforcement agent took out a notepad to check against. "Miss… Primakova, then?"

"A pleasure, I'm sure. Have you found Chikatilo yet?"

"…no, ma'am."

"Why not?" Lisa interrupted very pointedly, still pleasant sounding if it wasn't for a hardening edge
to her tone. She even laced her fingers together just to set her elbows on the desk and peer at the man over her interlocked hands, to press the impression of an unamused schoolmarm home where it would hurt the most to someone that had done classroom schooling.

Flat footed from an unannounced change he had somehow missed, or perhaps he thought she would take over momentarily until the end of the school year, and the pressure from a woman that wasn't nearly as disinterested in his investigation the man tried to muster his original aim again. "Ma'am, these things take time."

"Obviously, but there's nothing you can offer us about our missing delinquent teacher?" An artfully disappointed expression crossed Lisa's features, and the older brunette leaned back in her daughter's office chair. "Well, I suppose we will need to seek alternatives then."

"You can't."

"Yes, yes we can. If you missed it, young man, we have connections to arrange our own investigation into delinquent teachers attempting to run after harassing our students."

"They won't find anything more than we have." The militsiya officer informed her flatly, tucking away a half-forgotten pad of paper into the pocket it came out of. "He has not returned to any known haunt, his residence, or anywhere he could have possibly been recognized for. The only last thing is 'your connections', as you termed it."

"Well, at least I know my lover will be both more through and faster than waiting on you. I have no idea why my youngest daughter insisted you lot be allowed to bumble about."

"You can't-" Whatever the man would've said was cut off rather painfully by a so far silent vor Arseniy gripping his neck in both hands, and he was wrenched out of the office by the more muscular and tattooed man before he could do much more than start from surprise.

"...why did Nya allow this to go on, Galina?"

"The Sun foundling and the Chinese pair she has. Their paperwork wasn't entirely solid at the time, and if anyone with the right connections had gone looking into everything they could to try to force things... they likely would've found that before long."

Lisa hummed curiously. "Did I just endanger something she was protecting?"

"No, ma'am. The Web's got Master Yaozu and Miss Sōng's records implanted where they need to be, and with Peter now in Italy his paperwork was merely hidden where required."

The older woman glanced to the side, where her toddler was napping peacefully and safely hidden from notice under the Web's concealment. "Useful group, those Mist users."

The Lightning had to admit she had a very damn good point. Warping reality was entirely over the
top as an ability but then again, they had fewer physical restrictions on their abilities.

…so far as they were mainly dealing with those with no idea Mist Flame Constructions were a thing.

They were all still learning their outer limits as Dying Will Flame users, where they all reliably failed and what could be realistic reaches they could push for. The current advancements in neuroscience were becoming… interesting to someone that held an electricity-based ability. Galina might just figure out how to do something very similar given enough time, and a little more help from medical texts from Tatiana.

The current fascination in the Flame training groups was figuring out how to copy or mock up something similar as another Flame's identifiable ability. Once the Rains ironed out their… logistical issues, and after they got over the outright abandonment of their previous lead due to their terrible behavior, the fact they finally did something interesting earned them barely any attention outside necessary interactions.

After a whole year of being outright avoided, even one or two additional people with Dying Will Flames speaking to them was painfully noticeable. However, once it became apparent it was possible to 'stack' Tranquility with enough effort that slightly more positive attention than usual turned inward to see what results this finding would also result in.

Lately, the various Flame groups' main attempt to copy one another's ability was her Lightnings attempting to copy a Sun's Activation without tiny green arcs of Flames giving away the real Flame user's element. It was the closest to being actually a thing they could possibly do, if the voltage could be figured out… and it was possible to keep a charge going on another human body rather than just the once.

The Storms, under Andrei the Sun's eye since they couldn't be trusted with a Storm Flame user as a leader, were trying to copy Rains in a non-destructive use for Disintegration. It didn't seem to be working all that well, as without a physical component Disintegration just slid down to whatever was nearby to eat at. More often the ground, or whatever a particularly unlucky Storm was wearing.

The Suns themselves had already know Activation would work on electrical systems, Andrei himself learned that when his Sun Flames manifested in the beginning, so they were attempting to somehow mimic the former lead Storm-Cloud's main ability of Propagation. It was… going, somehow.

As pure cheating made physical, the Mists were merely documenting findings for their main records and generally just being lurkers watching everyone else fail to do what they could almost effortlessly accomplish.

Lisa, just like her daughter, seemed to be a very 'hands-off' type of instructor for Dying Will Flame users. She was a touch more personable, engaging a few confused or lost Flame users in conversations to help them think around their issues, but mainly the collective Flame group saw her more as a parental figure of one of their own than an instructor in the art.

They sought the older woman's help more for smoothing little snags in their home life out than issues with the usage of their Flames.

Galina was wondering if they needed a councilor type for the students, Lisa was doing phenomenally well as one without shelling out the money for a civilian type the students would lie in the face of instead.

Even young Miss Fink had actually not shut down any attempt to pry into her past when the older woman tried, so there was some progress on that end. Then again perhaps a 'lesser' main councilor
should be hired to at least keep up appearances, since one of their teachers 'suddenly' and mysteriously disappeared on them and that might not be a one-off given enough time.

It would also take any kind of additional burden off Lisa. Sonya wouldn't be amused in that end either, because she specifically asked for such to be done even when her mother was one of her employees.

Lisa turned in her swivel chair to face the other woman fully. "Galina, why are you still here? I know Nya's a little impatient when she finally decides on how to go about something, and you could have entirely taken advantage of that to further your own goals."

"I could…" Admitted the Lightning slowly. "But what would it gain me in the end? Getting to see more of the world is only part of what I want. Being given interesting assignments around the world to solve is really it. As long as your daughter sees me as a competent minion, I'll get it with a little effort here or there. It's worth a few more months, especially as I already know how little she likes leaving things undone like this. With me here, she'll dwell less."

"I think… if you keep improving like this, I might actually forgive you for being the reason Tatiana was arrested as a girl." Observed the older brunette very pointedly, a smirk on her face when the younger couldn't quite hide her start of surprise. "I know Nya's completely forgotten you were the one to dare Tats into it five minutes after 'dealing' with you, and I'm sure you've already gone through the process of earning my eldest's forgiveness…"

"I've learned better." Galina hurried to reassure her, somewhat cringing as she recalled the beat down that was Sonya's variant of 'dealt with' back then. Painful, lingering, debilitating, and in the beginning she had thought the redhead had sent the blonde sister after her on purpose… which then thankfully made the safecracker interesting to her.

The wrong conclusion to draw as a girl, especially writing off the Storm-Cloud as just a tool the Sun had used to get her revenge. She had learned several lessons from the sisters, some of which that had been unwilling ones until she got over her resentment for rightful comeuppance.

Tatiana was a phenomenal people-person, it was entirely possible that if it came down to it she could ask for some strong-arm assistance from her little sister and get it unquestioningly. Sonya really was an anti-social ice cube if you caught her at the wrong time, who favored blunt weapons and words. That didn't mean the redhead elder sister had to ask, nor that the blonde younger sister was always so frosty and forward.

…the sisters' mother still scared her witless. No matter how many years passed, she'd probably always recall the wicked smirk the woman wore when her vor lover chopped off a particularly handsy recruit's hands off with a butcher knife.

Lisa was not a shy, retiring woman. Delicate would probably never be applied to her either, unless it was a physical descriptor in relation to her lover. Her daughters had picked up their own variants of their role-model's cunning, although they used it differently, but the fact it all was learned from this woman was intimidating.

Her daughters were also viciously independent, hard-headed and stubborn in different ways, and yet both would heel immediately if the older woman made any indication she wasn't as amused at their antics.

Lisa gave her a very familiar terrifying little smirk. "Keep learning, then."

"Yes ma'am."
"Well, hello there." Tatiana greeted brightly, closing the long-term recovery ward door behind her.

Sergei gave her a slightly slitted sideways look, seemingly just adjusting to being aware in his physical form again. Edik and Anna both merely nodded to her arrival, but while Rasputin remained in his visitor's chair the Mirror Lady rose to leave the room as 'no longer needed'.

"Stay put, there's a bit of information trading I need to do with all of you." Refuted the nurse with a slightly less exuberant smirk for the other woman. "So, although Rasputin was aware of some of this… the one that attacked Igor was sort of identified. Not fully, we don't have a name or anything, but it turns out the same Mist that attacked you is a 'long-standing' Italian issue."

The finger quotes she used earned her two deadpanned looks and a simply calculating one from the Mist laid out.

"That's the story Vongola's putting out about it, and given their reputation claiming otherwise might be more annoying than it's worth to do… but entirely possible if you feel like it." Continued Tatiana when that was all she got. "Nya's of the opinion whoever the fuck it is needs to die already and is entirely willing to do it. However, it's not dead yet."

'So, it would be better if 'Igor' died a quiet death to prevent any interest?' Sergei asked without moving his mouth, which was actually really creepy.

Apparently Edik also heard it and didn't agree. "Why should you do it?"

The Mist wasn't yet moving through muscle control, more like Mist control, so even the very act of waving a hand dismissively was more like watching a stickman or a puppet than a human body move. 'I was lucky, Edik. The other didn't take me seriously, and in truth I was not much of an obstacle to it, which might be the only reason I remained me and not shredded to mindless wisps. If it comes out that I survived to the wrong pawn, the other could learn and decide to finish what they started…'

"The CEDEF have already horribly failed to do jack shit about this Mist, too." The older Sun chipped in wryly. "As a matter of fact, until the effects were rubbed in their faces… they didn't even know. However, because all that's true and it's one of their things that hurt you… they're willing to put in a little effort to 'fix' the situation."

"And that fills me with confidence, truly." Snarked back the younger dismissively, with a huff.

"You are no longer young enough the surly thing is cute." Tatiana informed him pointedly, jabbing a finger into his temple. "Furthermore, you knew coming in this place could possibly result in your death. Or Igor's death. You had the same contract I got, which stated in black and white that the residents might just kill you for kicks if you behave stupidly. Additionally, the ability you have with Activation is never going to be widely accepted simply because its focus is the dead. That was the whole reason Nya had Usov stick you with a Mist backup in the first place. Yes, this was a close call. Shockingly, Igor came out somewhat intact. Learn from it, arm yourself against a repeat, and move on."

Given Edik was about the age for teenage angst, she wasn't remotely surprised her words earned her jack shit nothing. Sergei was a year younger than his assigned Sun, and at least gave off the impression he was amused even if he couldn't manipulate his body to show it instead.
Well, as he was a mortician, he could be as surly as he wanted to. It wasn't like St. Julian's customer service ability was judged by anything, and anyone needing a mortician would not care about the conduct of one of about five people that shared the duties in the basement.

"In other news," Tatiana carried on, not batting an eyelash as the Mirror Lady suddenly faded out of existence, "Igor, or whatever we're going to be calling you from now on, you've got a lot of physical therapy with me or Avdotya pending. So you can regain what you lost."

She'd bet the Mist girl had gone to report herself as done so she and Sonya could leave for Italy finally. Likely, when she got back to the apartment, it'd just be her and the Lackey for the next few months.

The nurse wouldn't begrudge Shamal his mom-time, and his summer vacation to get settled in.

…lucky brat, though. She wanted to spend two whole summer months in an Italian castle by the sea. Although, perhaps maybe Lisa and Arseniy wouldn't immediately nix the idea to crash Sonya's castle for Christmas next year. Spending part of Russia's nasty deep midwinter in a place with moderate Mediterranean climate sounded fantastic.

'So… what was all the excitement yesterday all about?' Inquired the so far voiceless Mist, absently trying to flex his fingers with actual muscles instead of relying on his Flames.

He had little to no visible progress in the absent motions, but the repeated and frequent practice would just only help him relearn quicker.

"Invasion attempts, you know how it goes. Some idiot said the wrong thing to another over enough alcohol, somehow the distance one group got into the island was used as a bragging point… and then there's the stupid waste of life as another idiot got his whole syndicate banned from the island for a full year trying to get further than the first one."

However, being this latest group were previously really frequent visitors… they had gotten concerningly close to being somewhat effective around the usual barriers to being an actual hassle. Aside the massive powers, Vongola from Italy or the Sun Yee On from China, taking offense to something Mafia Land was involved in no one was supposed to be able to adversely affect the important operations going on.

Which really did sour a lot of the whole attractive draw of free-violence to an actual risk to the stability of this place but then again, they were criminals and 'stability’ wasn't really something they tended to be involved with often.

It will take only time before the invasion attempts turned into something a lot more disruptive than just an occasional distraction used to blow off steam happening once or twice a month. When the jealous and scorned tried to take something they didn't know much about or deny it to those 'better' than them turned into something to secure the daily operations against this or that attempt to take something over by force.

Then again, anyone not expecting that would be not only blind but stupid.

It was actually somewhat surprising the invasions hadn't turned into something more hazardous to everyone living here before this. It really was all fun and games until someone actually lost major reputation, or properties, to the frequent attacks.

Mafia Land as an island had only existed for a touch less than thirty years now, as a concept it had taken cues from the pirate port of Tortuga in Haiti to the gambling dens of Tijuana in Mexico to even
the smuggler's haven of Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. Only there was no government trying to hide the criminal influences from international attention, no law enforcement tasked to stop them, and certainly no civilians to get in the way of everything.

Interestingly, this island was the second attempt to create a vacation-like criminal haven for the world.

The first Mafia Land had been an actual island, anchored to the earth and everything. According to her elderly Fut Gar trainer Han-yue, the first one had sank after WWII kicked off as part of a military operation. Enough broadsides by passing warships on the 'abandoned smuggler's cove' would sink anything not built up enough to survive it, then no one wanted to even remotely admit such a thing had existed or they had a hand in destroying it.

Then the wandering mechanical version was built from the ruin, and all the 'old-hands' that knew of the first Mafia Land were just waiting. Waiting for the next disaster to hit and sink the island.

They all thought Sonya would be it, there was a close-call with a previous Cloud frequenting the island suddenly snapping and destabilizing the old defunct part of the island too badly to rebuild any of it.

…except her little sister refused to fall in line with their expectations of her and be a brute of a Cloud destroying what they spent years of their lives working for.

Sergei's eyes gleamed a dark indigo, alerting the nurse that the Mist was probably dipping into her mind.

"Well," Tatiana drawled out, making it clear she did not appreciate his antics, "If you're feeling so fine perhaps we should get started. Rasputin, care to learn the process so you can help your little friend out when Avdotya and I trade places in a month?"

As a Sun, of course the younger mortician was fully up to and wanted to help. His hasty agreement ensured the bedridden Mist couldn't interject a protest tactfully enough to evade having his very own personal nursemaid.

She gave the kid a toothy grin. "And the next time I catch you mining my mind for more information, it'll be worse. I'm also not taking the hit for you if anyone else catches you at it."

The kid, being still physically unable to control anything beyond eye movement so far, faked the sound of an insulted sniff for nothing more than effect. 'Since I seem to require a new name, call me Trotsky.'

The actual Russian Trotsky took an ice pick to the head and survived it for a little while. "…like that's going to help hide you."

Edik quickly snatched up a half-filled glass of water off Sergei's bedside table to take a drink, and hopefully stop coughing that sprung up when he attempted to smother his laughing.

The real Trotsky didn't really survive his attempted murder for very long. The whole 'ice pick to the head' thing had a couple complications with it that eventually killed him in the end, even if the man had defied his death long enough to actually get into a scrap with his attempted assassin. Not like the real Rasputin, who apparently tanked a fabled and ridiculous amount of damage and sabotage before finally going down.

The pair of them were morbid little snots.
"Fine, whatever. I'll let the others know they can visit in ones or twos, expect the Rain pair to be in here in moments."

The whole incident had rather shaken the Russian contingent of medical students. That one of their own had been attacked, regardless of that being the very reason a Mist was haunting the mortician's steps. Stella and Raisa would probably be lurking down the hallway waiting for her to step out to sneak themselves in, if only to reassure themselves and each other that Sergei had survived his attack in reality as well as in mind.

At least none had asked to default on the contract securing their training they were taking advantage of. Even if Klavdia didn't seem to give two figs if Sergei had died and Traiko had nothing good to say about nearly anything in existence still, and the group after them she honestly couldn't recall the names of without a list before her were mainly Lightnings that took everything way too literally being mostly teenagers with more material worries.

Like girls, or booze. Worse, girls and booze.

Thankfully they'd grow out of it given enough time, and perhaps eventually they'd get more than just being tasked with corollaring unruly patients or the occasional walking defibrillator as soon as they graduated from medical trainees to actual nurses in a few more months. The two extra Suns in that group were being crammed with lessons in hopes of getting them up to competence quickly to assign to a pushy doctor that wanted a Sun minion to work with, and the lone extra baby Storm had deviated from general medical lessons to specifically chemistry-related lab work only.

Avdotya would be the one guiding them further once the next medical Flame group hit intern in whichever fields, because once Tatiana came back from her year as a school nurse she'd start in on becoming a surgeon immediately.

…hmm, wait. She had vacation time again.

Lisa might just be willing to fudge when she could trade nurses for her if she asked her mother nicely, and then the redhead could be there for Shamal's first summer in Sonya's home as well as spend more time with Galina sorting out her current worries over the Lightnings early childhood brainwashing woes.

She just had to call her mother quickly.

(ooo000000)

(Friday the 1st of May, 1970 continued. Sonya & Tatiana's apartment, Mafia Land.)

Tapping down the nails of the third moderate-sized crate she needed shipped to Italy she was somewhat meanly leaving for her Lackey to handle with a few good whacks of the palm of her hand, Sonya then turned to the nearest reflective surface. "Mirror Lady, a word."

She had been meaning to have this conversation before the Mist reached her castle, and now was as good of a time as any. At least here she didn't have to worry about possible Misty tantrums bothering many.

When the Mist woman in question presented herself actually in the room for once, she started what would hopefully be a quick and painless conversation. "I know you are bringing Pavuchky with you, the only way I will allow him to roam the grounds is if you not only ensure anyone who is a resident can see him well before encountering him… but if you also take the pains to prevent anyone outside the grounds from seeing him."
There was an utterly unnatural moment of stillness, a weirdly deafening moment, before Anna seemingly both became merely an image of herself and firmed up into an actual physical form. "Boss lady… Pavuchky is a big boy. I'm sure he will behave himself…"

"Anna, we cannot explain away his existence easily. Moneglia is a tourist destination, the wrong person snapping a picture at the very wrong moment of the castle on the hill would attract more attention than any of us want to deal with." Holding up one hand with all the fingers splayed out so it wasn't suggesting a full stop to the other, the thief continued very clearly and patiently. "We are also going to be making use of the local residents to keep the castle clean and maintained. They would carry tales, eventually someone will notice that Pavuchky should be a common tiny orb weaver and not a spider the size of a human head lurking in a windowsill."

The Mirror Lady brought up the hand mirror she was semi-sure actually had the wildly discolored and massive Flame imbued orb weaver within, looking at the reflective surface that only showed the younger Mist anything before raising her head again while pressing said mirror to her bosom. "Do I really have to constrain him, Boss Lady?"

"That is not what I am saying, Mirror Lady. Aside what we would like or want, orb weavers tend to spend the day resting on their webs in the first place. I am asking you to ensure his web is made somewhere secured, away from high-trafficked areas of easy spotting as he would probably prefer by nature, and when you let him out to hunt or simply walk around it be in full dark when he would want to roam as it is." Yes, she had bought a book or two on spiders. The real use of that purchase was the slide from slightly confrontational to contemplative in Anna's Flames, not the fact she now had insect books to temp Shamal into learning Greek with her aside his cultish religion thing. "There is… also the fact that Mingxia seems to be a bit arachnophobic. That might be in more than just her, and I have already asked you not terrify our own with him."

She looked down into her mirror again, and disturbingly a heavily red and yellow striped chitinous leg extended from the glass to poke her in the chest. Pavuchky only left that one leg outside of whatever Mist pocket carrying case Anna decided was fit for her pet, but the fact it did seem to reassure the young woman convinced Sonya that going out to buy those books had been money well spent even if Bjørn hadn't quite hidden his dirty look for it while she had so many to go through left pending.

The fact her circus-era drinking money account seemed to have been retrofitted to be her 'book acquisitions' account needed proper thought to decide if it was insulting or not.

"…Anna?"

"Alright, Boss Lady. Those are more than reasonable terms." Suddenly agreed the pleased Mist, as if that wasn't a jarring tone shift. "We agree."

…that there was a 'we' was semi-disturbing.

Unfortunate, being she had been one of the more stable Mists before her preoccupation with the surprisingly robust Flame arachnid got twisted into her Flame-born insanity. The mirrors were one thing, and a surprisingly useful medium to help the Mirror Lady in refining her abilities through. A crutch that hopefully she didn't require anymore and was just something she used out of habit than any true need.

Perhaps the spider was just the inevitable progression from Anna's obsession with illusionary monsters into a very real one.

Well, it was something to do. Ask after both her and Usov's abilities and how they had expanded
from their rocky beginnings in hopes some of what they could share would help Shamal.

Sonya glanced around the apartment, at the crates she needed Björn to ship to the castle which only held about three-fourths of her Mafia Land based book collection. Those packed up were the safe books, what would be left behind were texts that any amateur or published historian should not have possession of. The rest had to wait for either a suitable secure place to be found or made them.

…or she could leave them here.

The few bookshelves she had here were now nicely barren… except for those rare books she took from that rather annoying German couple and the Nikola Tesla treaties.

"Boss Lady?"

"…we’re going to stop by a bookstore on our way to the port, but do you have a preference for mode of travel? Air will be faster, but ship can be done if you don’t mind a few days of travel." Mafia Land's bi-yearly sweeps meant this year they were on the wrong side of the world to do the day-ferry service.

That left getting an aerial lift to a cruise ship, taking a passenger ship directly off the island she wouldn’t recommend anyone do without a high number of fellows to fill the deck at least, an actual plane, or… swimming for it.

It wasn’t an entirely impossible option. Enough down-on-their-luck criminals that blew through their pocket money or life's savings did it when the island passed close enough to either Cape Town in South Africa or when the island passed between Australia and New Zealand. Less lucky idiots got the middle of the Atlantic, Indian, or Pacific Oceans to try the swimming skills in.

"Air will be fine."

…so, she would have a weight limit. Alas.

Anna smirked at her before fading from view, allowing her to fully appreciate the decision was entirely made to annoy her in return for being given hard rules to follow.

(Saturday the 2nd of May, 1970. Bonsecours Market, Old Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.)

Cranking the little wheel that this model of camera used to scroll film across the aperture part to take sill images, Cherep turned around only to snap a picture of the St. Lawrence River not more than a stone's throw from the building and repeated the process to ready the little device again.

A pause to check the time, and he put the camera down to wander about a little more until he found something else interesting.

He did wonder, if he looked around hard enough, if he could find more akutaq. 'Eskimo Ice Cream' was almost like tolkusha, if a touch less salty and sweeter than the Russian variant that used fish roe instead of warm-blooded animal tallow. However the stuntman had also found a limit in the sand for his culinary escapades, fresh bloody meat wasn't entirely his cup of tea.

It at least had to be fish or cooked, a strip of seal flesh cut out of a furry body was a little too much for him.
Not even Skull was that brave, although out of politeness' sake he had to at least try something when it was offered to him. The hunting party he helped out a little past St. John's, mending a sled for the group when the ship his tour group had hired needed a moment of downtime for some internal repair, offered him either a cup of blood, a bit of their kills, or the pinkish berry studded paste to try.

He opted for the lumpy paste, however much Roy made disgusted sounds at him. Siegfried tried some and admitted it wasn't bad, and Cherep had fond memories of a significantly less colored paste-like version being given to him on his way into Moscow after his… childhood misadventures.

Odd little taste of home he hadn't expected at all aside, now the group he was touring the world with had picked up the escape artist as promised he was sharing a time-slot and wouldn't be showcasing his stunt work tonight. He had some free time and, after giving Mauricio freedom to do as he wanted now they were a whole continent away from where he had been caught out at, Cherep decided to continue doing the tourist thing on his own.

There were both the pictures for Tatiana and the written log for Sonya he should be a quarter of the way through with, he already had a furry little stuffed walrus and a stuffed Yorkshire terrier sent to Valera for a belated birthday gift. Technically, Cherep was going to send his little brother a plushy per city his touring company stopped at… even if Lisa would likely smack him upside the head.

"Cherep!"

Blinking in surprise, the Cloud turned around nearly completely just to see a still somewhat portly Rain huffing his way towards him. "I thought I wouldn't see you until tomorrow, or something."

"Yes, well…" The Spaniard turned to the man sheepishly accompanying him with a flourish the guy actually winced at. "As part of being your 'PR manager', and because you have in fact told me of this individual, allow me to introduce Rémy Sartre."

…who?

The guy looked… well, normal. Which couldn't mean it was anyone from the circus or his years as a mechanic…

…oooh. Wait. "Sartre, as in Nya's PI Sartre?"

"Ah…" Hemmed and hawed the guy, trying for a slight smile that looked a tad bit embarrassed. "…well, she did hire me once."

"He's a fan." Mauricio informed him brightly, then almost twirled on a heel to go back to whatever networking things he felt he had to catch up with no matter how hard Cherep tried to tell him a delay wouldn't greatly matter while they were in Europe. "And now, my journey is done here. Off for another adventure! I bid you adieu!"

He snickered, as the private detector stared and just generally looked taken aback, as the colorful dressed and flamboyantly natured man stalked off with a purpose. "Ciceron's good people, he's just a little excitable. So, my baby sister's favorite PI, whatever brings you to Montreal?"

Rémy coughed and cleared his throat, turning to face him fully with a slightly wry expression. "Vacation and family, my aunt lives in-country. And, well… you're here?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have a show scheduled until Toronto." Cherep admitted, rubbing the side of a nose for a moment before slinging and arm around the Frenchman and leading him back the way he just came with the Rain. "Tell you what. Since you took on Nya's research efforts so she could spend some relaxation time with our older sister, who basically mainlined textbooks and coffee for an
"entire year to become a nurse practitioner on her way to becoming a surgeon, I'll get you and your aunt... and...?"

"Is that why she paid a small fortune for busywork?" The private investigator cracked a small smirk. "My cousin?"

"Three tickets to the show in Toronto, as thanks." Confirmed the stuntman. "And, if Mauricio failed to tell you, I'm Cherep Bazanov. Mechanic, general professional world-tourist, and occasionally Skull de Mort... the Immortal Stuntman."

Gamely shaking the right hand held out to him, Rémy finally somewhat relaxed since being somewhat shoved on the stuntman by a very busy Rain. "As your man said, Rémy Sartre. Private Investigator, former police officer, and a bit of a fan."

"Nya told me a bit about you, and I'll admit to greatly liking you're a fan of moi, so... if you don't mind I'm currently doing the tourist thing today I'd really like to get to know you a little." Cherep released the guy, examining his half-spent disposable camera for how much film he had left. "Fans before I got 'well known' are a bit special, after all."

It was really interesting his baby sister's favorite Frenchman was a PI, and a former police officer to boot. It would be a little tricky, and a bit hazardous, but maybe he could avoid having a hitman or assassin as a brother-in-law.

...or, if she wanted, as the guy he had to get along with as her lover à la their foster parent's relationship.
Eying the slightly orange stone that made up her freaking castle, she couldn't really get over that part, Sonya took a deep drag from her cigarette before turning to Larion the Rain's slightly scarred up father.

Tolmachyov Afanasii getting his family out of the country where he had been beaten to a very bloody pulp, his son tasked with a suicidal assassination of a full criminal clan member, and his wife taken hostage for good behavior and insurance against delinquency was all well and good. Showed he had an ounce of self-preservation and he valued his family more than any other connection or job he might've had. To the guy's credit, scars and all, he hadn't turned any kind of ill humor on his wife and kid when his own ineffectual ability to protect them got shoved rather rudely into his face.

The whole incident… probably did murder off whatever faith he had in his or his family's personal safety. The Zolotov Clan's invested in his son's survival or not.

She might or might not have impacted that much, in truth. There was the possibility that if she had followed up with the little family the guy might not have been looking desperately for a way out to the point his Classically natured Rain son noticed. To the point the kid practically jumped her to enable what his parent wanted so desperately.

"So… what's the issue?"

"Climbing weeds." Reaching out, the dirt-stained main tugged harshly on the vines twisting up the 'back' of the great 'main' building. "Need either a trellis or a frame for them to climb on, otherwise they'll twist into the cracks and ruin the…"

Breaking off slowly, he dubiously peered at the thin concrete holding the stone bricks in place behind what was probably morning glory vines. "Masonry? The cement between bricks."

"…thought it was called caulk… masonry then. Like near the windows you just replaced to plug a draft, because we can't feel it but your man warned it would leak wind from somewhere constantly."

"Which should probably be done sooner than later and not ruin a good couple hundred-thousand-euro repair." With a somewhat smoky sigh, the thief ran a hand through her lengthening blonde hair. "Right then, do you know what should be used?"

"Not a damn clue." Afanasii informed her simply with an absent shrug of dismissal. "I just started here for the lack of anything else to do, and once I heard of the old problem and it's disappearance I could put two and two together after taking a look at this."

Fair enough. "I'll see about a gardener somewhat quickly then. Do you have a preference for a job?"

Absently rubbing the dirt off his hands onto his already rather dirt-encrusted corduroy pants, he glanced from her to the castle's back… garden plot, then off to the six-car garage right next to the main building. "I've been basically doing odd-jobs for most of my life, I don't have a preference."

"As of right now, I just need a few supervisors of general things and busy-work people." Sonya had
a whole month to get a staff of people hired for everything from cooking to small repairs any household would need someone to handle. "...want a cigarette?"

Afanasii took the fragile tube of tobacco with a shrug. He was greatly less blasé at the offer of a finger of Cloud Flames to light it from.

"I think the idea is that your wife will likely be the head of household while I'm gone, since she doesn't have much of a reason to wander off for any reason." She offered after a moment as he considered his options, because she highly doubted Anna wanted it on top of security duties and babying her monstrous spider pet. Galina probably wouldn't mind, but she also wouldn't be here for another month. "Being the case, repairs and replacements are probably under what's his face... Usov's father, but going out and getting it is still free so... want to shop for a living?"

The scarred man slowly nodded as he cautiously lit the fragile tube of paper and plant matter before bringing the smoldering roll to his mouth. "I'd be useful... especially right now. Guess I don't mind."

Grimacing as she flexed her back, the thief wholeheartedly agreed. There were beds... just not a whole lot of them. As the older of the two, Sonya opted to get as much sleep as she could on a built-in square couch wrapped around a support pillar on the second floor, letting Anna take the actual cot that was somehow free even with the number of people they hadn't been expecting taking the 'extra' beds.

Her spine was utterly unhappy with that decision to respect her minions. Buying herself and everyone else that needed a bed should probably be a theme for today.

That did contribute to why she was up so damn early after a trip. The other thing was... well, church.

There were three 'proper Catholic' Churches in Moneglia proper, two nearly side-by-side less than a street apart. She had intended to go visit after 'morning' Mass, because what someone would say to a fully-grown woman might be different than what they would say when a young impressionable child was around. She had mostly neutral or somewhat positive interactions with Renato’s Bishop and Father Luka in Moscow, but in her experience one or two individuals did not really represent the whole.

Then again, the reverse was possibly true too.

The Saint George Parish, the Oratory of the Disciplinary, and the Church of the Holy Cross were the churches within this comune's limits, and if she wanted there were yet more within a mere five kilometers.

The Bishop of Reggio Calabria, Giovanni what's his face, did in fact send her a letter through Ganauche and Vongola about the Archdiocese of Genoa's general stance on criminals seeking whatever religious needs. More than half of it was utterly incomprehensible to her, and she really rather hoped Renato was either intending to visit or would meet up with her at the Iron Fort for the brat's summer vacation so she could shove it on him and get it translated for plebian non-Catholics.

Worse comes to worse, she could get either Peter or Ganauche to read it for her and sum up the important parts. If the thin Sun couldn't parse through it after a decade doing other things instead of religious observances, then the Lightning Guardian probably could do it.

That wasn't ideal, admittedly, and she'd be really annoyed if she had to ask her sister's current fling to parse the church-speak laced letter for her.
Which may or may not have been the point, now that she actually thought about it.

Bishop whoever might've been counting on her having her fellow godparent around to handle religious things as she wasn't Catholic. Why could be for any of a few thousand reasons, aside the obviously insulting or the slighting secondary suspicions she had.

Well in that case, she might as well just leave it up to the little Catholic boy it'd be important too. Obviously it wasn't that important to the Catholic religious authority to be remotely helpful to a non-religious caretaker trying to figure it out, so Shamal could tour them all and then pick a not particularly unpleasant one for however many years he'd want her to go with him.

"…what is this thing, anyways?"

"Might've been a garden plot, or a general planter box for… um, noble-stuff." Afanasii offered slowly to explain the entire terrace of open dirt boxes neatly sectioned between cobblestones, scratching absently at some stubble he should probably look into shaving off sometime today. "Or… it could be the plants in a planter box overgrew the binds of where it started from to spread all over without someone to cut it all back."

Sonya couldn't decide if the guy was just that deliberate in everything, or if he was 'adjusting' to her. She didn't deal with enough new people to guess, and she didn't know him enough to tell.

That would be corrected in a fast hurry. Massive though this property was, there actually wasn't really enough usable space yet to avoid someone specific. The more they opened up and furnished the castle, not to mention the still ongoing construction out on the 'front' acre, the more actually habitable space there would be to spread out into and avoid someone.

…how did one plant a kitchen garden big enough for a full castle's worth of residents, anyways?

It was either grow a good portion of the produce the household would need themselves, and extra for the other residential houses being put up, or foot the entire massive grocery bill for everyone for at least a year or two. Italy might be capitalist, but good Soviet Russians weren't. Both communist families that moved here probably didn't realize moving so far would mean being paid enough to afford their own food and roof instead of having it provided as part of a work agreement.

It could change given enough time, and greatly depending how flexible they all were.

While Sonya wouldn't mind a more communist work-agreement with Usov's and Larion's parents, in that for exchange for a couple work-hours per day she'd buy their groceries and maintain their homes up to reasonable expenses and some whatever pay on top of that, it'd have to be very delicately worded so as to not alarm or trigger some kind of government intervention 'against communist threats' or whatever bullshit.

Tax season would be a bitch-and-a-half.

Sonya, and by extension her brother who very thoughtfully put his name down on the papers for her, had skated by the last tax season in Italy because the purchase didn't quite go through until after the deadline. It would be this year's December that they'd have to declare prosperities, residents, income, and pay taxes on it for living here. Bjørn's current preoccupation was finding a method by which her work could be considered 'legal' taxable income, via investments and a few 'fake' books she had to publish sometime in the coming year.

Which made the version two of the 'hippy book' and maybe an attempt at a bias-less historical textbook really likely distractions for her while waiting on everything and everyone to catch up. She
should double-check that manuscript was ready for publication sometime soon and doing it herself away from the Zolotov Clan would mean she'd actually see royalties for it once it was published.

…if it would be published.

This was assuming there was a need for hippy-books disguising Flame lore in the civilian sectors. Which also needed Galina to do the whole 'hippy' part, she wasn't sure what style the Lightning had been going for even after rereading the first damn volume for the umpteenth time.

She shifted around in her stupidly comfortable boots, actually somewhat unwilling to start in on all the things she knew she had to do.

She had not cared a whit for whatever kind of home she ended up with so the castle-thing, while bewildering and slightly out of left-field until you actually thought it through, wasn't really objectionable because she failed to speak the fuck up for something smaller. The being in charge of everything was obvious, it was her money providing things like housing and such.

Just… there was people. More than she felt comfortable dictating orders to or getting involved with in any capacity. Now she had to get to know these people, more than casual acquaintances because their children or significant other had some esoteric fire-based spiritual ability.

Then take a risk on yet more people, an entire 'comune's' worth. Of… Catholic, Italian, capitalist, strange people.

Who all could very possibly have a significant influence on her and her time here, because while she might not give a damn what they all thought of her…?

Shamal very possibly could care a great amount. The brat was still somewhat impressionable, and if a religious authority or a community leader took exception to her for whatever reason the kid might pick up on that… and then get into mischief because of it.

Mists weren't easy to anticipate, especially growing ones and for certain the grown ones. Cutting out all the little things that might snag into something headache-inducing was an aim, except…

Sonya did not have a great track record with 'people'. She semi-sort of killed a lot that had genuine, actual grievances with her or those she worked with instead of anything like 'talk it out/over'. Those that didn't have genuine grievances with her she kind of completely ignored, because often it was them being stupid or objecting to things like 'you are a Cloud' or 'you steal instead of kill for a living' bullshit.

That was all criminal people interactions, not civilian people things.

She was still kind of half-waiting for the first of 'you're a thief/criminal' issues to crop up and be thrown in her face like the 'female' thing, especially now.

This wasn't Moscow, where it was actually somewhat hard to tell the criminals from the law enforcement ranks. This was Italy, a resort-town thing isolated in a sea-side valley within the Ligurian Apennines mountain range, and hiding a small criminal operation here might be entirely possible for only a handful of years. The reason why she couldn't find much of any criminal influences nearby the only other time she had been here was entirely likely the few to no cover even a smuggling operation could get, compared to other port-side towns who might have more population or connections to greater cesspools elsewhere.

Without, of course, investing a ton of money into the place first. Like she did, so 'appropriation' attempts might just be in her future after the opportunistic criminals figured she had enough time to
establish things to be nice and murky.

She didn't mind hiding the truth within yet more truth, as the book-thing was becoming. She minded flat-out lying in the face of people that could and possibly would learn the real fact from lies given enough time.

Humans as a type were really rather smart, up until they weren't. Given a mystery to ponder, most would dig into it just for something to do in between moments or other distractions. Eventually, some to all might just uncover enough bits and pieces to make sense of a few oddities she wasn't pretending she could entirely prevent.

Ten years, because the brat was seven and seventeen might just be around the point he'd try for college, was the bare minimum of time she'd spend living here. That was a lot of time to spend at odds with your own neighbors due to stupid and preventable things, like lying to their faces and just generally being a bad person by their values.

"Sonya," called Adrik from just inside the castle's 'main' back door, jerking a thumb to something behind him, "come derail Verde off your book collection by telling him where you stuck your Flame-shit. I swear, he's trying to mainline everything you ever got your greedy fingers on to hopefully answer a few questions…"

"…I left most of that in, um… that place we were in before here."

The security expert turned on a heel to shout up the flanking stairs a few meters behind him. "I fucking TOLD YOU! She didn't BRING ANYTHING!"

…that wasn't actually true.

Both the mater journal of all findings the Zolotov clan had been left with, as well as the actual master copy of all her findings were on a bookshelf in Mafia Land. Her unpublished manuscript on Flame lore that needed a coat of hippy paint… and the old book the Zolotov clan published, were all in her luggage on the second floor's landing.

Comparatively that didn't really amount to everything she had on Flame-related documents, but that was more than enough to begin with until she had a secured bolt-hole to stick such things in.

"Who in the world is yelling?" Preceded the other back door's opening, and Larion's mom stuck her very green head out of the rather bigger than need be kitchen with a frown. "Mister Adrik, there are still people trying to sleep."

"…sorry, Mrs. Tolmachyova."

Huffing at him, out of what seemed to be more good humor than actual disgruntlement, her expression smoothed out into something more professionally detached when she spotted Sonya sharing a cigarette break with her husband in the garden-plot thing a half-level below the ground floor of the castle. "Oh… Afonya, Miss Bazanova, breakfast is ready if you care for it."

"Sure…"

"We'll be just a moment, Lanka." Afanasii affirmed after a moment.

The two smokers exchanged a look when the woman and other thief left them to it, and they both sighed after a silent moment.

"Beds, please. Whatever it ends up being, actual fucking beds big enough for whoever needs them
still."

"First thing I'll do after talking to Maximillian." Promised the scarred man firmly before stubbing out the burning roll of tobacco, rubbing at an interestingly ancient long-healed scar on the bridge of his nose as he turned and made for the little step-thing leading down into the garden-box-thing. "...and breakfast."

...yeah, breakfast sounded good before she had to go do people-things.

Like sit in a church pew for a few hours waiting out gossip and other attention-grabbing things to figure out if she could stand attending religious services for at least a couple years with Shamal, just to figure out which of three churches she wanted to 'attend'.

(Monday the 3rd of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

With their patron and landlady off again to hunt around the local town for her own and not clearly conveyed reasons, because she just suddenly wasn't in the castle anymore when someone looked around for her after breakfast, everyone mainly went back to what they had been doing without her around. Except those that had a new job, as Mister Tolmachyov, or the newest arrival who had aims of her own to do in order to do her job, which likely explained where the young Mirror Lady went off to.

Peter had spent about fifteen minutes looking for Sonya on Zinaida's behalf, to answer the question of where the mother of Usov would be doing the brewing once she had her honeybee hives set up and there was honey to brew with. When it became apparent the blonde thief wasn't present, given young Usov's help ensuring it, Adrik co-opted them all to assist with the book crates.

All seven of them. Waist high, almost wider than he could reach with both arms, packed to the brim crates. Only one was already inspected and unpacked over the couple days he had been here, the wood given to Usov's mother for beehives and the books it transported piled in the middle of the third-floor hall awaiting its transformation into a library. On top of the contents of two other packing crates, that had been gone through since the effort to consolidate the Boss Lady's book collection started.

Of which there were three or four more in the process of being shipped from both Moscow and Mafia Land.

At least the wiry Russian was inspecting them one-by-one, Usov was committed to continuing to help his parents enough to move them up three levels to the room earmarked to become the library, and the formerly nameless Storm now known as Hawk was building the bookcases as they showed up. Otherwise this would become a rather back-breaking effort given the number of volumes already waiting for sorting.

He had a few of her books, and for the time being it was something to do until his jewel cutting equipment got here. He might actually be more excited for the glassblower's forge and tools that was in the process of being sourced for him, but that would also need a lot more research before he could start manufacturing gemstones with specific and stable qualities.

Then there would be a lot more experimentation needed. It wasn't like anyone had managed to pin down specific qualities to why one or another Flame user preferred this or that style of translucent
crystal formation to another.

Getting exiled from Moscow so suddenly in the end of a school year was awkward, and somewhat jarring. Especially in the middle of a project like teaching classes, because a lot of his work the last few months was preparing the students he had been given for basic science tests and advancements to different lessons or fields of practical applications. It took him a moment after waking up to remember what happened and why he was in Italy so early.

The bright side of the sudden relocation was that he didn't have to lie about Chikatilo to Artemiy's face or get stuck between Moscow police investigating a 'missing person' case and the criminals that supported him who killed the man for reasons he actually didn't mind at all.

…or deal with the Chinese exchange students relearning proper classroom etiquette.

…or continue living in a subarctic temperate zone rather than a subtropical one with easy sea breezes and a lot of strong sunshine.

The distribution of people and semi-critical jobs just left him and the green-haired Lightning man free to sort and somehow make order out of the piles of books they had so far. Technically, the formerly nameless Storm was with them, but they did kind of need someplace to put the sorted books so he was doing carpentry today instead of sort the growing pile.

"so, I don't really remember the Dewey Decimal System. Or… any method to sort out the probably widely mishmashed library of Sonya's." Scruffy volunteered after a moment, which had only broken by Verde sipping more black as pitch coffee from a cup he brought up from the dining hall or Hawk hammering down a particularly stubborn nail behind them.

He wasn't… really sure what kind of problems the touchy thief would make for them both if that coffee put rings of stain on her books. Just borrowing her geology books had earned him a slightly frantic lecture by Galina, who passed on hard won knowledge from everyone else that ever had the misfortune to borrow a book from a Storm-Cloud book-hoarder.

…he still couldn't decide if the Lightning lady was being a bit overzealous in her attempts to safeguard him from pissing Sonya off, or if all of that was just prudence. Not that he so much as dog eared a page borrowed from her personal collection, figuring it would be best to err on the side of caution.

She seemed to have forgotten where she put more than half her book collection, and a few volumes were darn near tatty with age or repeated abuse. It could entirely be that only she was allowed to abuse her collection of papers, or the entire situation had been blown out of proportion.

Only time would tell, or specifically risking her ire in abusing it all themselves.

"I am uncertain if the task would be easier or more difficult to start before we have an idea of how many remain to be sorted, and the spaces available to sort upon." Offered the Frenchman after another semi-awkward moment, seemingly not feeling any social imbalance himself and more concerned with the coffee in hand from his unbothered tone. "Firstly, however… either the Bliss bibliographic system or the Universal Decimal Systems are… less obtuse and are less reliant on the basis of what has been acquired defining what will be."

Peter turned to look at the other man instead of the pile of books that had been moved here without the crate, which likely had been immediately delivered to Usov's mother for her own project out on the grounds. "I beg your pardon?"
"The Universal Decimal System is less... cumbersome with social taboos. Furthermore, the fourth category is left open unlike with the Dewey Decimal System. Wherein which we may make use of for less... or more, other information." Verde held up the finger of the hand not cradling his caffeine, and after another sip continued. "The Bliss bibliographic is structured by schools of thoughts instead of by subject matter, which is more complex if less flexible for the inevitable volumes yet to be written on undiscovered topics. Both do not put an extortionate of emphasis on Christianity as the only religion to be concerned with, nor relegate 'controversial' topics such as female related texts being sorted next to etiquette volumes and sexual orientation related to 'mental maladies' or other awkwardly related classifications."

"...huh." Scruffy hadn't actually thought much about it, or never learned those parts of the system. "So, is the Universal system anything like the Dewey?"

"Fairly similar, although Language is sorted with Literature within the UDS instead with the aforementioned differences."

"Congrats, now pick up a damn screwdriver." Hawk drawled semi-sarcastically from behind them, discarding his tool to push-pull a completed bookcase upright.

One of the thirteen similar pieces of furniture that needed to be assembled and there might be yet more inbound. 

"...where are we putting all these?" Depressingly, given the general volume of the crates they already had, Scruffy wasn't entirely sure if this number of shelves would be enough.

Even if the finished bookcase nearly reached the ceiling and had seven shelves each.

Brushing off his hands against one another, the Storm glanced around the open room with an assessing eye. "For now, I guess against the walls. We can make rows of them between the support pillars next, then... if we have to, line the hallways with them too."

Verde critically inspected the available shelves, the eight support beams that allowed a wide-open room even given the width which let the two floors below hold six rooms each, then drained his coffee. "May I suggest assembling them against the wall you wish to place them against in order? I will start by sorting out anything belonging various categories and slot them away as the space becomes available."

"If we're going to be lining the hallways with yet more..." drawled the other man just a little sarcastically, "how in the world are you going to sort that?"

"Prior knowledge." Returned the Frenchman tartly, which was actually the first show of personality yet from the man in front of any not the Russian already in residence with him before everyone else got here. "I have some familiarity with Miss Bazanova's fictional collection, or what little she amused herself with after leaving her home in Russia. Of which would not require more order than just by author and title. Hence, leaving such to a visible and easily accessed display on the lower levels would merely showcase fluency in various languages and restricting scholarly tomes to this library would draw less attentions."

The Storm tisked but didn't argue, the Lightning examined the dregs in his cup for a moment, and the Sun wondered which to help with more. Technically the other man had a point, until they had a place to put things and an idea of which order would be best nothing could be done with sorted or not books.

Of course, that was the moment the younger of the two Mists transported yet more books to the
Verde’s expression was a study in consideration, Hawk just laughed while wrestling around another set of boards around to assemble near the main door, and Peter supposed that rather decided him.

The bookcases were easily sorted and could be done rather quickly given the progress already. That growing pile of bound texts needed more effort to sort and even then, shelving them would take even longer.

(Monday the 3rd of May, 1970 continued. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Moneglia was basically just a resort town.

A few old smuggling routes once came through here an age ago, which long since dried up as the lack of criminal flavored infrastructure left them under developed. A hitch in a step here or there spoke of less peaceful personal histories, although all of them ended up being veterans of military careers instead of hitmen on vacation when she dug into the small handful.

Even with the Mirror Lady's willing assistance, Sonya couldn’t find much of the Mafia within the village’s limits. There were two grocery stores, a handful of churches she was still just wary of rather than remotely familiar with, one public school… which meant she’d likely send Shamal off to a nearby city for lessons somewhere private and more easily blackmailed just in case. A few different beaches, a pier with the fleet of boats at moor or heading out to sea, and enclosed within a valley placed between mountain sides with whatever would be up there.

…and a large number of small-town people.

Afanasii stuck out like a sore thumb in the wildly colored throng on his way to fetch what Maximillian commissioned for the castle’s furnishing, even if the scarred man was slowly becoming known as ‘that man from the castle on the hill’ and even more easily tracked. Brighter colors tended to shed heat better than darker, but after living in the wintery reaches of the Soviet Union most of the Russians now in residence had darker or drab clothing intended to fight against biting winds rather than sea breezes.

It would slowly change over the longer they stayed here. Especially with the oncoming summer months, and the large amount of work awaiting them all which would take a toil in both effort and clothing.

Tracking the whispers and wonderings back and forth was a simple prospect for Anna, and as for Sonya she acquainted herself with a ‘normal’ day just to see what the rhythm of the town should be. At the end of the evening, the two of them joined back up to compare notes.

It wasn't anywhere specific, because the Mist could find her anywhere in town and the thief didn't always use the 'socially acceptable' ways to meander through the streets.

Some married couple, who was middle-aged with a young barely adult daughter still in residence, lived in this house. Sonya was a lot more interested in their little rooftop niche, with just two chairs and a small table between them overlooking a stretch of tiled roof and a few meters of residential street.

Offering her mirror, the Mirror Lady ignored the empty folding chair in favor of sitting upon
absolutely nothing instead. "I found only a few things. An informant passing through who is far beyond city limits now, a member of the Superbi Famiglia hitching his boat to the wharf only to spend most of the time asleep in his cabin so far, generally just a few pickpockets and a few homeless..."

The polished-bright silver hand mirror reflected the scenes she pulled her words from, as well as a few things the Storm-Cloud was certain would be considered invasions of privacy if anyone learned of this. She merely ensured all those Mafia men were either on their way out or 'technically' outside her reach before passing back the silver-backed glass held in a simple pewter frame.

There was an argument that Sonya didn't have the right to these peoples' privacy just because she was the Cloud in residence. However, being aware of that didn't magically earn anyone her sympathy enough to avoid documenting their lives on principle. Just because she and likely most others didn't think she had the right to it did not also mean it precluded anyone else expecting she did, especially not those with criminal connections that went just the right way.

They would instead expect her to have violated everyone's privacy already and repeatedly, then operate on the assumption she had or would in their attempts to use her or her peoples' presence here for their own aims. If she didn't, and missed a threat, no one would be very sympathetic to anyone caught in the vice.

No one would help her or those risked in the end either, she'd just be blamed for poor territory control. However much she avoided being named to a territory before this and skated out from having any because technically it was first Arseniy's then Valera's territory not hers, she was always half-certain that anywhere she put down roots would be of some interests to anyone aware of what shade of Dying Will Flames she had.

The least she could do was ensure the infringement by her and her presence would net these people little to no further infringements by those with less safe interests in them.

...although, they would only come up to hostile or at least malicious attention because she was here in the first place.

She shoved a frustrated hand through her lengthening hair, taking a moment to straighten out her spine and take the pressure off her neck. Just that little movement caused a sizable knot in her neck, built up from an entire day of studying those walking the streets below her, to give way with a near audible click as her vertebra slid back into their proper place.

"Boss lady?"

"I don't particularly like that title." Responded the thief absently as she rubbed her abused neck, studying the dark clouds scrawling their way across a sky slowly darkening after the setting of the sun. "It was my sister's, and she's perfectly alive to use it."

Anna reclined gracefully into her non-chair while examining her mirror reflection, kicking up a heel as if her modestly crossed legs were hooked on an armrest that didn't exist. "We could call you the 'Dragon Lady'."

...well, it'd be her nickname. Even if that possibility made a few things twinge unsatisfactory, since that was a very personal nickname she didn't really want to share with more.

Which did beg a question. Renato hadn't been necessarily quiet about that name, he had been calling her a variant of 'little/dragon lady' for years now. For reasons she failed to ask because he had been ever so pointed about nonverbally getting her to do so by using the titles every time he saw her.
What would be her reaction when someone, not necessarily when the hitman intended to 'die' for a while, decided to pick it up?

A sudden flash without a source, the Mirror Lady using her handheld personal mirror to redirect the man of the household likely come up to investigate the voices so close to his home. A slightly dazzled blink happened before the middle-aged civilian frowned thoughtfully, gaze sliding past both women without catching on anything suspicious. Another moment, and he turned back to the door he had attempted to silently open on them without their notice only to leave through and reassure someone beyond it about tourists on the hill behind their home.

"Mirror Lady, are you sure you can keep an eye on the entire village?" A change of topic, yes. It wasn't awkward, as that was their original reason for being out here.

"It will not prove much different than what we did for the schoolhouse, and this comune… is not the size of a district of Moscow." Anna allowed passively, reclining fully on thin air as it became apparent the older woman had no intention to move. "Being alone is… interesting. I think we might've relied on each other a touch too much back home..."

Technically, she wasn't alone. Usov, and probably Shamal when the kid got here, would be chipping in here or there. Sonya made herself comfortable instead of point that out, interested in if the Mirror Lady would or could articulate a reason she thought that way.

At the very least, she could pass it on for Lisa.

After examining her handheld mirror for a long moment, the Mist dropped the reflective surface to stare up at the stars burning through the last remnants of sunset to shine down on them. "There used to be a… lot of opinions and interpretations of any one incident, and most of us had little to no reason to keep it to ourselves if anyone thought to ask for a second opinion."

"I'm entirely able to give one, if you need it."

"And Usov, and the rest." Acknowledged the brunette simply, swinging an ankle back and forth a few times before that started swinging in improbable angles and the thief ignored it. "Until we can establish patterns, and what should be 'usual', there is almost too much to investigate."

She glanced around while the Mist mused on her issues, then peered over the balustrade down into a rare side-alley the city's architecture allowed for. There were a few, more in the more commercial district where the streets suddenly dead ended almost randomly, but just an alley between residential homes...

When she glanced back, Anna had brought out her oversized spider.

"Anna, my promise for his safety only extends to the land we legally own."

"I hear you, Sonya." Cradling her pet on her stomach, Pavuchky sat rather placidly as the other woman fondly petted his abdomen. The colors now present in the spider ranged from Sun yellow to even a few tiny bits of a Cloud's lilac purple. "We'll behave."

She highly doubted that.

Pavuchky merely sat there, like a particularly ugly lap rat, as the skies darkened even more and the lamps studding the streets below flicked on. In the encroaching darkness, the thief belatedly noticed the Flame-eating arachnid's colorful stripes were dimly glowing.

It wasn't obvious from even her modest distance away, but the spider's colors were a touch too bright
when paired against the detail of clay tiles on the far side of this street. As things got progressively
darker the colors that matched the primary Flame types got brighter, to the point that only full dark
finally hid the spider's outline from her… but not the stripes of color.


Turning her attention back to the major issue in her life right now, Sonya had to admit Moneglia
was… pretty. Unorganized as hell, somewhat confusing, and very different than both Moscow and
Mafia Land, but it had its own charms.

A lack of openly carried weapons might become a virtue rather than confusing oversight, eventually.
The civilians, safely tucked away in homes or the few taverns for a glass or two or wine before
heading that way in dribbles, might eventually become something she was glad for to buffer her
home from the rest of Italy. The streets, as twisted and as crooked as they were to account for the
natural lay of the land, might become familiar…

…but it would take time. The kind of time she never spent anywhere, even when plotting out a new
heist or in-between picking up contracts to try her hand at. She suspected it would be a long while
before she was as comfortable here as she was in her father's home territory, several years if what she
recalled from her childhood in this lifetime would hold true.

"Anna, let's go home." There was nothing else to do tonight, as long as that one remaining member
of Miss Silver-White's husband's famiglia remained in place rather than rise early for his own aims.

"…alright." The Mirror Lady and her pet just disappeared, leaving the thief to jump down to the
street-level return 'home' on her own.

(Thursday the 7th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria,
Italian Republic.)

"Are you… sure about that?" It was admittedly a charming castle, a pale dawn-orange on a sizable
bluff overlooking the Ligurian Sea. A beautiful vista, a charming nearby village in the business of
relaxation, quaint and very easily manipulated to cover someone's base of operations.

The front yard of the property was certainly untidy, although that could be due to a more modest
construction effort and the change of ownership that likely took place some short time ago. The
speculative attention aimed this way from the locals certainly supported that assumption.

Renato Sinclair flicked his eyes up and down the same charming scene as they passed the opened
gates to the property, then snorted softly. "Unquestionably."

Not quite, given he had questions. Well, the other Mafioso did tend to be that pedantic. If there ever
was a way to spark an argument, he'd take it with both hands or arrange for it to occur in his own
good time.

Not taking the bait, although two weeks was rather long to be following the other man around Italia's
rolling mountainsides and valleys and a spat might just been nice, Cesare instead kept his attention on
the activity he could see from the paved drive.

Interestingly, although they had arrived unannounced and somewhat early for polite company, before
the hitman's fingers even brushed the main door handles it opened. A young brunette girl gave the
two of them a sweet smile. "She's on her way in. Take the stairs, the landing to your immediate left is being utilized as a meeting area for now."

"Mirror Lady." Tipping the young lady a respectful nod, Renato accepted the silent invitation to enter and passed her with only a twitch of a shoulder to show how little he liked having the girl at his back.

This 'Mirror Lady' slid brown eyes on him, and after a moment a warning flash of deep blue flickered across what should've been warm chocolate in color. An irrepressible Cheshire smile was offered before the young woman just simply flickered out of existence as if she hadn't opened the doors for them.

"...more of 'your' kind, I take it." He asked as he accepted the unoffered invitation of the still open door gingerly, well aware he was treading on unknown territory.

"I haven't... entirely been clear with why I want you here." Agreed the infuriating hitman glibly, not even giving him the courtesy of glancing back for an expression of unsurprised exasperation. "Those details, they'll keep until the dragon lady's here too."

Cesare could turn on a heel and leave, it was always an option up until things got confirmed. It'd serve the ruffian he knew from an early age perfectly well... and frankly Renato could do with some negative reinforcement in his life.

However, curiosity was a damning thing. Two 'ladies' so far, a castle with the grounds to match, and some of that overly bright spirit-fire that just loved to complicate everything. "First a 'mirror' lady, now a dragoness?"

The Mafioso that led him here tossed a suggestive smirk over a shoulder before taking one of the two flanking staircases that led upwards. "Underestimate the ladies of the Russian Mafia at your own risk. It'll be your own merit here, Cesare. I can only get you an introduction."

Interesting. Very interesting. Now he had a very impertinent itch to figure out just how deep the man was in with his new Natalina. Not Italian, not interested in marriage, apparently not Catholic... what else was she not?

An assassin or a hitwoman?

It wasn't like the irrepressible womanizer would stop his usual habits for just any kind of threat, and without disgruntlement as well meant a respectable one. Deadly things were enticing no matter the shape, even if they were not what most would see as lovely.

The interior of the castle was appreciatively cool and almost-silent, there was a whisper of turning pages and low voices speaking a foreign language from below and rhythmic thumps from above speaking of some construction effort to match what was taking place in the front lawn. Interestingly, it seemed the second floor's meeting area was positioned just so to hear almost everything that would occur noise from the main and second level.

The lack of any other noises allowed what was a floor higher than this the clarity to be heard somewhat fully. Enough silence would allow more clarity, but that wasn't necessarily important right now.

"So... who is your 'little dragon lady'?" Cesare inquired faux idly as he joined the other Mafioso on a charming little nook of a landing, attempting to suss out exactly how many were in residence so far by hearing alone.
"Thief." From the faintly superior tilt to his features, Renato was well aware of his suspicions had utterly delighted in dashing his expectations. "A very good thief, as well as 'one of my kind'. More to the matter at hand... I, ah... ended up with a godson. He's going to live with her here in a month or so, which means I don't have to do this circus myself or tie my movements down to predictable patterns to afford it."

After a moment of blank staring the assassin held his silence, sensitive to the very sudden and slightly morose turn in the normally unreadable hitman's mercurial moods. A hard-earned skill admittedly, but one rarely worth the effort and childhood spent to acquire it.

If he hadn't heard this before, and he was certain Dante said nothing of the sort, then he was being very careful of the little ankle biter indeed. News of his temporary Don status made the rounds for a long while after he gave it up, occasionally the slightly murderous chef caught the whispered rumor of completed contracts that lingered even now in the hitman's steps, and quite a few enjoyed gossiping about the rare few times he spent as an invited guest to the Vongola hosted functions... but Cesare had heard nothing about any child Renato might be seen with.

Taking a perch on a curious square of wrap-around couch anchored to a support column, the darker of the two Italian natives stretched out his lanky frame for an apparently decent length wait. Taking his cues from him, the assassin assembled his own self to watch the comings and goings over a wrought iron balustrade just to get a moderate idea of what this was shaping up to be.

"Shamal's another of 'my' kind, a Mist like the Mirror Lady from before." Continued the man behind him into the pleasantly companionable silence, in a tone that was more absent than deliberate. "Sonya, the little dragon lady as I call her, was the only Flame user I knew of and was still on good terms with that had experience with his type... and owed me a favor. One thing led to another, the brat decided he'd very much like a mom and she didn't mind. It takes a significant amount of pressure off me, hence why I suggested you for a chef as I know full well she's... got her own career to handle while securing him for me."

Two ladies of firmly civilian bents, one outdoorsy type hauling wood for a project and an interesting greenette with the faint scent of baking bread on her, passed down the first-floor hallway intent on gathering said wood the first walked out with. A scarred individual he recalled from the comune's streets, hauling something in only to leave equally as briskly right on back through the front doors himself.

Noticeably, there were two children talking about the visiting Mafiosi from the floor above. One high-pitched enough to suggest preteen and the other with a childish quality that made a stage of development other than 'young' hard to place. A few other deeper voices, male probably, also suggested at least two more were with them above.

Even more curiously, Renato's voice added to what noise there might be wasn't attracting a lot of attention aside the childish sort. Everyone likely knew already or were warned off from leaving their respective floors, which highly suggested someone was keeping an eye on the visitors without being spotted... or some didn't know.

Possible or not, it wasn't something to dismiss out of hand. Whatever tricks Flames allowed the users, assuming all could use them equally well was likely a touch generous.

"Out of the goodness of her heart, then?" Unlikely, Renato was enough of a pretty face with dubious morals to know better than to fall for a honey trap.

"She told me she didn't intend to return, at first. But the older generation of vory, Russian Mafiosi, that raised her have this thing about letting brats be brats and not targeting them on principle. The
"kid kept asking for her, so she stayed so he could wrap her around his little finger." From the expression being allowed to show, Renato thought the same as Cesare.

Lucky kid.

Well, he wouldn't begrudge the child his fortunate situation. That someone, two even, were invested in his health and wellbeing after losing his biological caretakers was just a matter of situational luck and more a credit to those adults around him than his own.

"What are you very delicately not telling me?" He inquired instead of saying so, for speaking of it would not only be tasteless but pointless.

Biting back a too-quick scowl, which was interesting indeed, the hitman rolled his eyes. "What do you know of Clouds, Cesare?"

"Very little to none." It wasn't his field of expertise, besides which an actual Flame user would have a better grasp on things than he did just as an observer. Turning around and fully leaning on the balcony, He cocked an eyebrow at the Sun Flame user. "What should I know?"

"Telling would likely do you a disservice."

"Would it now?"

"Ironically enough, I'm being actually honest in that. She loathes it when her behavior is compared to 'what everyone knows' about Clouds." Advised his old childhood acquaintance in a toneless factual way, calibrated specifically to not catch any attention to his words.

Cesare wasn't that stupid. If Renato was offering anything on a topic, especially in a method to slide advice under notice because he was that much of an asshole even to people he knew well, then not paying attention would cost dearly. "Most dislike being lumped in with a group, tends to minimize them into stereotypes."

The opinion only earned him a razor thin smirk.

"...I thought you said the details could wait for your dragoness to join us?"

He very pointedly pointed beyond him and a little more up than immediately understandable.

A blonde woman was very patiently waiting for him to look at her, sitting cross-legged on a two-story chandelier. With the chain supporting the whole mess of gilt and crystal off the ground so high pressed against a modest chest, forcing her head to one side, yet the apparent owner of this castle seemed entirely unbothered by her… eclectic choice of seating. "...hello."

"Cesare, meet Sonya Bazanova. Thief, Shamal's godmother and my fellow godparent, Soviet user of Dying Will Flames of Cloud and Storm, and currently in the market for a chef." Renato airily announced in case he had missed that detail. "Sonya, an old acquaintance of mine. Since you seem to prefer assassins so..."

"What's wrong with Tyr?"

"Nothing." The assassin looked backwards and yes, the hitman was damn near sulking.

Good Lord above, this was as amusing as hell and it had barely been started. "Miss Bazanova, if you would care to show me the kitchens I can convey to you my resume."
"…why would we need to go to the kitchen for it?"

"It's edible, I just require the use of the kitchen and some supplies to make it."

Instead of immediately accept, as most would when a chef wasn't available for a large number of people resulting in filling if not substantial meals, she blinked at him once. A rather weighty moment of silence passed without a word, a glance pass him to see Renato's expression or non-expression, and then the thief slid with improbable grace out of the chandelier to drop on the ground floor.

"That was a 'sure', in case you missed it."

"I apologize, Renato. What was that? A 'forgive me, I have pressing business elsewhere and am not staying for lunch'?"

"I didn't say that." Corrected the hitman smoothly instead of hastily, getting up and wandering to the stairs himself. "Besides staying on principle after your sloppy attempt to dismiss me, the little dragon lady might have questions of Italian culture and I'd be remiss in my duties as her fellow godparent if I didn't stay to help her out a little."

Well, the asshole was always very good at having an answer or three on the ready just in case some gamble or another blew up in his face. Cesare was not surprised and adjusted his tentative plans for his 'resume' to include an opportunistic food-stealer to satiate as well.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 7th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Oh no, my dear. Continue, please. You have a better idea of the tastes and preference of those here than I would." Breezily passing right by Ruslana, who had been in the middle of baking a number of loaves of zavarnoy from the look of the rye beer-smelling liquid at her elbow, the recently introduced 'Cesare' paused and gave her doughs a curious look. "Although, I would love to know what that is… later."

The man had an energy to him Sonya distinctly knew well, and the other equally as confident criminal type seated himself right next to her at the kitchen island. Renato was utterly unimpressed with the makeshift seating, but still sat there with the hard-won elegance and attitude to match with his fellow Mafioso.

She wondered if it wasn't so much a culture thing as it was something impressed on them from a shared incident in their past. Mafiosi were indeed kind of dandyish, from Ganauche to Timoteo and even Tyr a little bit. Especially if she compared them with Arseniy's usual behavior.

…then again, she rarely found anyone who could match up with her father. Arseniy had a few years, almost a decade and a half, on anyone else she bothered to take measure of so it kind of stood to reason she didn't find anyone equally as impressive.

Pausing her mental train of thought, she very pointedly fixated her attention on the ceiling and repeated to herself that she would not revisit that stupid childhood crush of hers.

Lisa was very lucky, yes. She was also ruthless, and that was not something anyone would survive trying.

When she looked back down, the expression on the hitman's face was way too interested for her own good. Digging out a letter from a Bishop, the thief flicked that in his face instead of address anything
he might want. "Translate that, if you would."

It didn't wipe the smarmy smirk from his face, but he did at least start in on what she asked by shaking out the paper curiously to scan through it. A less amused and more intent change in his expression told her she was probably correct in her initial assumption.

"It was specifically written to ensure you made the decision and not me, isn't it?"

Renato didn't immediately agree, and tellingly he also didn't immediate refute the assumption either. "Still a bit of a reach, little dragon lady. It could be a test to see how much you do know."

The assassin he brought in to cook was still cheerfully mixing something up, standing very specifically in such a way to be able to still watch everything going on behind or around him through either the reflection in the window or the images reversed in shiny metal pans waiting for him to make use of.

Lisa used those tricks as well, but it was curious to see them in someone she highly doubted her mother ever interacted with.

"Summed up," continued the hitman after another glance through the letter, "the Archdiocese of Genoa is aware of those in our line of work but the Diocese of Chiavari is… not entirely in the know. His Excellency doesn't exactly say what is or isn't safe either, this is reading as if he expected you to pass it on to the Bishop of Chiavari to get a personal run down of things instead of attempt anything on your own."

Sonya very pointedly stared at him flatly.

He just tucked the letter away in an inside pocket of his suit jacket. "I'll-"

"Don't bother." She decided shortly, settling in to keep only half an eye on the chef as the longer he failed to try to harm Larion's mother the less ill at ease she was. "It was just a curiosity of mine to see if you'd come out with something else than what I did. Shamal will pick himself out a church, and that'll be that."

"Ho?"

"Whose opinion matters more? Some stuffed-shirt in a cathedral or Shamal?"

Renato smirked, didn't hand back the missive, and waved away her snippy remark. "I believe I need to concede the point, although I believe I should point out I'm not going to be the one living with it."

"I didn't say I wasn't going to check them all out before the brat gets here." She would've said more, but a plate of… cesare salad was placed down in front of them both. The hitman filched her cherry tomatoes, got a hand-sized variant pitched at his head in revenge from the cook, and ended up with at least triple the tomatoes while looking very satisfied with everything indeed.

Sonya blinked bemusedly at the assassin's back, who was now fishing some kind of pasta out of a bowl she knew for sure they hadn't had in the kitchen before the Italian interlude.

For throwing something at the Sun user's head, let alone getting away with it without eating a bullet, she was seriously considering hiring the man.

There was no way Cesare could know she disliked raw tomatoes so Renato usually ate them from her plate if he could, just like there probably was little chance he knew she'd let the theft of mushrooms happen equally as often.
Which was to say… every time she ended up ordering something garnished with mushrooms or raw tomatoes. As Renato disliked spinach with a passion and let her eat that from him, it wasn't a bad trade-off.

Now if the man tried for something a bit more substantial than the things she disliked she'd probably toss the entire damn table at him, anchored to another supporting pillar or not, but the habit was a long-standing one they both knew the limits of. Apparently it was so long-standing someone that had similar characteristics knew full well he did it, enough Renato in turn was familiar to Cesare's immediate response to such theft.

Sonya was never going to get much out of the hitman about his childhood. There were a few things here or there, which were likely details she could've gotten with an actually serious background check or three eventually. When Renato stopped being Renato, even if he became someone else, Shamal might be curious about his childhood. Enough so only Dante D'Attilio or this Cesare would know and might tell him anything of worth.

She glanced across the island countertop-thing to see the man in question's half-grimace half-sneered expression even with his teeth sunk into a ripe tomatoes' skin.

Nosy asshole probably had more on her in exchange, so he had better not try anything funny.

Again, his innocent expression sucked ass.

"Something wrong with the food, Miss Bazanova?"

"I'm kind of hoping you'll actually nail the asshole with a tomato. I didn't want my mouth full when I got an opportunity to laugh at him, and this looks too good to waste that way."

Cesare paused, hands full with what looked to be freshly made pasta noodles. The smirk that stole across the assassin's expression was… without compare, interestingly promising. "Now… the stories I could tell you about that."

Renato very nearly opened his mouth, took one glance at her semi-expectant expression, and very pointedly popped a halved cherry tomato into his mouth instead.

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(Friday the 8th of May, 1970. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Good afternoon, gentlemen." Lisa informed the two men the moment they were shown into the office. They both glanced at Arseniy before answering with their own salutations, making her glad her lover hadn't left with their son already to whatever aim the two would have this afternoon.

She was used to tattoos, so the snake scale pattern on one was less eye catching beyond the moment to take in the fact he was practically covered in ink and not suffering a strangely stylistic beating. The bone through the nose on the other… that took her a second.

"…Miss? Primakova?" Inquired the same man with the bone, in a surprisingly pleasant register. His glance to the side, at the fully-grown man at least a decade older than him who didn't react a whit to the attention, earned him no answer. "Yes, well… your son Cherep spoke of something to us. To prevent any troublemaking as he and Ciceron are off on his world-tour, and because your eldest daughter left us no way to reliably contact her without him, we are turning to you..."
"We, of course, appreciate your caution. However, this isn't the place questions are easily asked." She pointed out very bluntly for her usual wont. "Especially without consequences."

These were circus people, honestly until her middle children had declared a desire to 'run away and join a Russian Circus' she had little to no connections with them. It might very well be a fact she would come to regret, or just prudence which would have no bearing on her future, but while acting was a skill any good criminal needed just in case being related to actors in any social way was rather defeating the purpose.

No one would believe a lie if said liar was a known one.

"We are accepting of consequences." Suddenly overtaking the French-speaking and dark-skinned man she had actually taken as their leader in whatever purpose, the rather extensively tattooed man spoke German with a bit of a regrettable lisp. He slid more than walked in a very interestingly sinuous way to stand in front of the other fellow. "It is an old wound we seek the addressment of, and as legally those in charge of a bit of a situation will not hear us... well, that leaves very little else to do."

Lisa gestured to the chairs in front of her principal's desk, catching the very fleeting expression of something lightning-quick and very wry across the man's colorful face. "Well then... I suppose we should at least hear you out. I'll get to the problem with you coming here in time, or I might help you avoid the issue entirely if you have a good enough reason for it."

"I am Aziz, an ah... I believe you call them land-barons, a son of a former land-baron and plantation owner of the Republic of Mauritius. Small African island-nation, formerly a French then British colony who recently acquired our freedom." The heavily tattooed man smiled, showcasing a lot of filed and pointy teeth. "Before our liberation, Great Britain evicted my people and reclaimed the island chain called the Chagos Archipelago. Only to turn around and lease out the largest island to the United States, as a military base."

"Why, out of all the professions in the world, would you then chose to become a circus performer?"

The self-claimed Aziz gave a rather liquid shrug. "What else would I do? I have little money, only a claim to a land illegally seized and leased to another world-power who would be inconvenienced if I was ever widely heard, and I was suspecting no one would assist me in the end anyways. Why not a circus performer? I see the world this way and get paid for it."

...he had a good point. "The man behind you?"

"Nahum was a son of a retainer of my father's. We grew up together, and he is... somehow, more respectable than I am now."

She wasn't entirely sold but then again, she'd heard wilder stories that turned out to be completely true. "And why exactly are you seeking my youngest daughter?"

It was the leverage they applied to gain this meeting, without liberally spreading Cherep's name around and got them into her office so quickly after only a few days in Moscow.

"I am aware I will never get the land back legally, but I certainly have no desire to see them keep it without at least paying reparations either." Claimed the man simply, gingerly lowering himself in the previously indicated chair across from her, which encouraged the other man to do so too. "I would also like to go home, at least once more, before I die. That has very nearly happened already, only the grace of your eldest saved me with no money to pay a doctor to help identify and nurse me back to health. I will gamble on your children more than any other option I still have available to me."
Apparently, there was more to the story than Cherep told her about meeting the rather paunchy Rain from Spain. Lisa folded her hands together and gave the two guests a sweet smile with a bit of an edge to it. "Just so we're all on the same page, I'd rather like to hear what you thought about Tatiana's visit. As their mother, I worry a bit and it was rather unusual for one of my children to call up another for help. Especially alarming when it's the eldest's nursing profession that's needed."

Aziz cocked a colorful eyebrow at her instead of capulate immediately to her desires. Nahum had no such wariness of influences to him to wonder if there was more than just a mother's worry involved and did start detailing the start of the whole incident that left half a sideshow circus troupe stranded in Budapest trying to raise money for their snake-charmer's medical woes. In a wonderfully musical baritone or not, there were several assumptions she knew for a fact had to happen before her middle and civilian child would walk into a situation between a local syndicate and a civilian.

Assumptions she didn't remotely like.

…she needed a very long talk with Cherep when he got home.
"Hmm… no, my dear. While I am new to the area, I work at the castle up the bluffs." Cesare corrected idly, brushing up a pleasantly charming smirk for the girl working a surprisingly modern electric register at the grocery store counter. "I believe I'm the first hire, as well. Or… rather, the first Italian hire."

"The… orange one?" Asked the young woman incredulously, even helpfully pointing to the back corner of the shop as if that would clear up which orange-stone castle might be around. "So, there are more people there?"

"Russians. Stout folk, although they only seem a tiny touch humorless at first." Confirmed the assassin with a wry smile for the girl, passing along a double-handful of carrot bunches and three eggplants to be added to his order. "Two full families, and a small handful of either loose Russians or… I believe the man might actually be French. Another man could be either African or English, I'm not entirely sure."

Cucumbers, a small basket of tomatoes, a frankly rather bewilderingly large number of potatoes, and… was he missing something?

The lovely Ruslana had asked for… beets, for something she only called kvass. He was missing the beets.

Oh, and rye. A lot of rye and buckwheat, and rye-based beer for that frankly intriguing bread recipe she agreed to show him. Almost as much rye as he needed flour, the main aim of this shopping trip.

By the time Cesare got everything he had volunteer to gather from the comune's local stores and fetched a bottle of white wine to test himself and possibly serve paired with a fish-course for Sunday dinner, the clerk had gathered her thoughts together to ask some actual questions as she bagged up the groceries for him.

"Russians? As in communist Russians?"

"As little as I have managed to learn so far, that was exactly why they aren't living in Russia anymore." He'd pay for the bottle of wine from his 'wages', thankfully he could just pay for it with the funds Maximillian released to him as long as he made it clear he'd pay it from his eventual paycheck. "Have you seen that scarred man going about his business around here? The father of one of the family groups, terrible business that happened to him… moved here to protect his family from the same. Remarkably dedicated fellow, even if he is a little wary of everyone new."

Miss Bazanova had been very frank about what was and what was not things she or the others in residence in her castle would appreciate being spread around, but also enlisted his help in that respect over a very quiet Soviet-themed breakfast yesterday. Showing a very good grasp on her own limitations, especially as she got through that entire conversation with as few words as humanly possible while also conveying her limits, she had enlisted his help in ensuring the rumors would be at least sympathetic if not entirely positive.

It was something that would be harder to do for non-Italians in a firmly Italian area, and while she had the option to utilize the Mists in residence to do it instead… she would 'appreciate' him starting an actual base for the assumptions to be drawn from. Otherwise Constructed rumors tended to twist
strangely, apparently.

Cesare had no idea it could be done that way in the first place, so until he could learn otherwise he would be holding his silence on his skeptic disbelief. In the end, helping the dragon lady of the castle prep the *comune* to be warm and accepting for Renato's godson was entirely a task he would be delighted to assist her with.

…the money wasn't anything to sneeze at either. A bit odd to be paid in gemstones, but he was never going to argue against being paid in thumb-nail sized diamonds for an extra word here or there. Unnecessary in the end, understandable due to the newness of their acquaintance, but some nice padding to his personal funds.

"How true is all that?" Asked the cashier after handing him back his change, placing some crumpled newspaper around the glass bottle to buffer the eggplant and beets from being bruised by the wine.

"Afanasii Tolmachyov is the man's name, you can ask him yourself. I now work with his wife, lovely lady." Advised the *Mafioso* cheerfully, settling two brown paper bags into his off-hand and arm.

"Just catch the man on his way out and try not to waylay him too long. He'll tell the story himself, and if you can figure out who the villain of his previous plight is I'd greatly appreciate hearing it."

"Why don't we see them in church, then?" Inquired the girl before Cesare could leave the store, both hands on the counter and leaning out just enough to see him past the day-old discount breads.

He gave the girl a jaunty wave goodbye. "Ah well, apparently it's against communist values. Religious gatherings were rather harshly frowned upon from what I gathered, to the point it's more a private event kept in the family than something to do socially just out of self-defense. Christmas is actually illegal in the Soviet Union… not that it stops them from celebrating it all that much."

The assassin knew full well she waited only a bare moment after he exited to the streets before dashing on deeper into the building, likely to pass on some tidbit or another to someone else. Who would pass it on, and on, on again, and probably to yet another person or thirty of their own.

Perhaps the dragon lady would part with that palm-sized ruby she pulled from a pocket when paying him in diamonds if he could grease things enough she became a popular figure… but he would not say no to that triangle shaped chunk of white sapphire for just blunting the edges of suspicions.

Really, just the opportunity to meet and get to know Renato's little ankle-biter was a good enough reward for a word here or there. Getting paid to do what he'd do for free was just nice bonus.

Of all the currencies he had been paid in for his services, this at least turned out to be a very amusing and solidly non-depreciable for his time.

Getting paid in gemstones by a professional thief… what would the world throw at him next?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 9th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Cesare was flamboyantly fitting in, trying his damnedest to get Larion's mother to stop being so wary around him while also keeping the Rain's father from getting too irked at him attempting to charm his wife. Neither Afanasii nor Ruslana really minded the friendly overtones aimed at them, Larion was very skeptical about the man entirely for that alone, but it was a bit forward of the *Mafioso* to try cultivating them into in-house contacts without letting his presence settle in everyone's mind first.
It was only a day later. You'd think the man would've waited at least a week or something or try one
of the more criminally inclined adults. But no, he was being rather productive with suggesting a few
Italian-only meals per week to get them used to the local foods and trying to adjust to Usov's
mischief as a possible prelude to Shamal's when the kid's school year was over.

…she really wished him luck in that, it was never the same madness in each Mist.

Friendly Italian assassin trying to stuff them all full aside, Sonya should probably turn her attention to
hiring maids. Probably at least a gardener or two as well to help the Mist's mother out with taming
the back acers.

However… that required calling up Miss Silvery-White, or Mrs. as it was probably now, in order to
get introduced to where Italian Famiglias hired their criminally-friendly staffs. Just so she didn't have
to risk hiring pure civilians and have something about Flame users' lifestyles just not making much
sense to them, and risking Omertà. The second one was probably somewhat more important, but she
just couldn't be bothered to put in more effort than need be with smoothing out or preventing the first
in order to not be forced to hire criminal-connected and possibly chancy agency people.

She, staring somewhat blankly at her bedroom's ceiling for the lack of anything productive she was
apparently to do, decided that it should at least be sounded out today instead of another day of
stalking the village like a particularly paranoid carnivorous beast. There was nothing that said she
had to hire out whomever she met until she had to, and at least it would stop the weird looks when
she swept the floor or tidied up somewhere.

The thief bought the damn castle, she could clean it if she wanted. Technically the only one who
could tell her what to do here was Cherep, and that was only because he had the deed under his
name.

With a sigh, she rolled off her thankfully rather sizable bed and over to the end table holding her
purse. She didn't have the Inverted Rain's number, but she suspected Bjørn did and she had his
number.

If she had to hire criminally-connected people, then they shouldn’t be too fussed when Anna went
through their heads to weed out the disruptive and idiotic trying to serve two masters at the same
time.

Worse come to worse, she could just hire purely from the local villagers and ban anything Flame-
related going on during the day work-hours. It'd be annoying, but possible. She hired a local
construction company, one actually based in Moneglia, to do the four single-family homes already so
that should prove it was good honest work for the civilians.

Actually, that wasn't a particularly bad idea. The more people that had residents locally meant the
less people she had to provide housing for. If she gave Cesare a room on the fourth floor, then she
could probably get away with only a butler-type and a head-gardener to work with Zinaida on the
grounds. All of which could share that floor as there were only four rooms on the fourth and fifth
levels.

Maybe another, possibly another guard-general handyman if Afanasii didn’t slot in there eventually.
Cherep still owed her free mechanic work if she ever needed it, so he could do that when he needed
a place to crash.

Which reminded her, no one took that tower room. It was more an observatory and sight-line related
room right now, but if she had the plumbing reworked a little it could be a rather high-perched room
itself.
Anna opted for a bigger room on the third, Usov would remain with his parents, maybe Cherep would like the height. The fifth floor below that could be for his circus friends, or guest rooms.

…she should probably have that construction company install an elevator. Along the back of the castle was probably the only place that had a free wall available on every floor, and that way everyone wouldn't be required to stay on the lower floors for ease of access reasons.

Also, she really needed to stop sulking already.

So what if this was more grandiose than she expected?

The fact her minions were so over the damn top was actually a good thing, otherwise she would've had to fit three families and several loose men into a small cottage in the backwoods somewhere. If she was so damn hung up on the small-cottage idea she could fucking build it on the grounds somewhere, either by hand or by hiring someone else, so she and Shamal could go live there during his summer vacations instead.

If she didn't want close neighbors, there was the back acres on the mountain between them and Trigoso she also owned instead of the slightly over two and a half acres of tamed grounds enclosed by the castle's original perimeter walls. It would hamper some of the work Usov's mom had already put into her makeshift beehives but in the end, everyone would get what they wanted.

If they restricted the castle as 'civilian-friendly', or at least as closely as they could possibly manage and cover the rest with either Usov's or Anna's help, and leave it for single staff only… there was the rest of the two and a half acres of land to worry about. Five single family homes, with an average of two baths and four bedrooms each, were already being built.

There was nothing that said she couldn't have one herself, if a touch smaller than the rest.

Except Verde's, apparently. His only had one bath and two bedrooms being built. The scientist made up for that by having three levels of underground labs that needed to be dug out and stabilized before the concrete was even poured for any house, the bottom-most labs for hazardous work and the topmost apparently for studying or recording the results.

At least, that's what could be inferred by the ventilation ducts and heavy wiring being installed on the finished basement levels and the frames going up for the first and second floor walls now there was no risk of caving in the whole bluff.

…would the Lightning appreciate those lowest levels being hidden from the construction workers once they were done?

A rusty sounding crack happened behind her, startling the thief into whirling around and summoning a hammer to her hand. After a second, she padded over to the in-suite bathroom curiously.

Afanasii looked at her, examined the wooden trap-door affair at the other end of the room, and very gently shut the false-door affair that apparently opened her bathroom to another. Afterwards he pried it open again, this time fully without anything barring the freely moving hinged affair.

"…what the hell?"

"Might've been the master's where you are, a shared bathroom, then this might've been the mistress'." The man gestured to the open arches that showed the hallway on the other side of the castle leading to Adrik's and Verde's room. "Would give you access to any kids…"

"Huh." She was pretty sure the wounded security expert had identified three significant dead-spaces,
two on the ground floor just next to the stairs and one on the third. "So... why was this closed off?"

"Remodeling efforts?" The man didn't sound confident, but she could see why he suggested it. Her bedroom was about the size of this open sitting room. If there were a few doors put in, this room would match the master's in volume.

The only issue with that assumption was the lack of hinge-holes on the archways. Even to her eyes, the walls were either expertly patched after removal of any doors or there had never been any in the first place.

...creepy.

"Could you go ask Hawk for a bookcase?" Something heavy in front of that would prevent anyone from just wandering into her bathroom while she was in it, at least without her clearly hearing it, until they could do something about this little access door. "And have you found anything else?"

The scarred man sheepishly shuffled sort of away from her. "I wasn't... I just heard Verde mention an odd amount of moisture down the hall when he passed me at breakfast."

"It's an older building, there could be more." When he didn't respond, she did obligingly changed the subject and mentally marked that conversational gambit as a failed one.

How did people do that statement-conversation bit?

"Did no one need anything today?"

"I got most of the things we could get around here already." Afanasii informed her a touch wryly, and when she waited expectantly he scowled slightly. "And that chef volunteered to restock some supplies instead, so there's... not a whole lot for me."

"Go check the top-level rooms, for drafts or plumbing issues. They said it and the wiring was updated when we bought the property, but that's... almost too generous to take at face value. Especially given the number of bathrooms this place has." Before he could get a step, Sonya continued. "And start looking into what plants or seeds you can find. I'd rather farm plants, but if you can find local sources for topiary would be alright for straightening out the grounds."

"Anything else?"

"...a book. Or seven. I'm out of new things to read." She didn't wait to see the incredulous look that was likely tossed her way, given the pile of books still getting shelved in the library, she grabbed the edges of the loose metal hinged swinging plank of wood back over the gaping hole in her bathroom.

Did they have a phone book?

Calling up the local newspaper office and placing an ad for landscaping or gardening professional should be next. A few summer-vacationing college students or locals might not mind being hired to just be extra hands to help clean up or lend some muscle for a paycheck. Furthermore, before doing any of that, she needed a word with Cesare about the general pay schemes for simple drudge work.

He might not be a local, but he was a native with a better grasp on this nation's currency than she or probably anyone else aside Verde would have.

The assassin-chef was also apparently invested enough to remain being a helpful individual to her and her minions, if that would outlast actually meeting Shamal remained to be seen.
Not entirely last but certainly as important, she also needed to do a top-bottom search of the castle for anything else too interesting. Like this 'hidden' door, even if she had known full well something about this wall was suspicious she didn't open it up and figure out where it went to. Dithering around with nothing while those remained unsearched… Lisa would've been rather disappointed with her.

Knowing there was dead-spaces in the blueprints was one thing, seeing if anyone that owned the property previously utilized them for anything was important. If she got in trouble for someone else's stupidity she'd be royally pissed off.

Sonya skirted around the tiny mirror-room set in her bedroom right next to the bathroom's glass doors, which was only probably a closet, and padded over to the actual main door to her bedroom and the second-floor landing beyond that.

She was… pretty sure there was a phone on a table on this floor, or maybe it was in the dining room?

There was one somewhere… and Verde would likely know where the phonebook was. She could ask him about hiding the laboratories at the same time.

(Sunday the 10th of May, 1970. Oratory of the Disciplinary, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"I thought you left already."

"I did. I came back. I seem to require the use of your pier." Renato brushed off her question idly, taking a seat next to a Russian thief on the pew she was sitting in. "Is there a reason why you've been sitting here for half an hour?"

"Not particularly." Sonya refuted, tilting her head back to return to aimlessly staring up at the vaulted ceiling and a picture of the nativity placed behind the altar.

A lesser man might hope she was rereading her strictly atheist mindset, he knew full well she was eyeing the artwork and appraising it in her head instead to see if it would be worth anything. The pastor would be appalled to know what was going through the seemingly devout lady's mind instead of her own prayers, only to be moderately reassured she was eyeing it to see if that needed protection.

"Why… well, I suppose I know why…"

He threw an arm over her shoulders, squeezing her only once so she wouldn't immediately shrug out of the hold. "I'd apologize, but…"

Everyone in their line of work would assume the same thing. Assuming she was the one in control here, so everything was hers. It wouldn't remotely matter who was mayor, who actually owned the properties, or even which locals were the social authorities.

There was a Cloud, it was her territory.

Curiously, he expected her to have gotten shifty and removed herself from under his arm by now. "Since you have the option, have you decided the outer limits?"

"Might as well be the outer limits." Countered the thief with little amusement, tipping her head back against him just to roll it and crack her vertebra back into alignment. "I've yet to decide about the pier
and water dock, because technically seawater isn't claimable. Lucky Mrs. Silvery-White…"

Hmm… the Superbi Famiglia?

Genoa wasn't too far out of his way and passing on a warning of Sonya's residence and awareness of their man should at least gain him a bit of leeway those murderous little fellows still on his heels wouldn't have. Equally more he could pop into the Archdiocese of Genoa about that letter in his pocket before continuing on, so it was more his way than out of it.

Nilda probably had a watch posted, just to be informed on when the thief would move in, but if the man hadn't left after learning that… well. It could be for a number of reasons.

Least of all would be to capitalize on the Storm-Cloud's supposed ill-tolerance for riotous behavior in her territory. Moving in a few retirees into the limits to take advantage of the enforced peace was a motive, running minor players being hunted through an unknown Cloud's territory to scrape off the unwanted tails was another he could think of off the top of his head.

…kind of like he was doing.

The persistent tail with dubious and likely lethal intents he hadn't been able to shake off through several far-flung countries and hostile native criminals would not have Sonya's permissiveness allowance behind them. Meaning while he could pass through likely freely as long as he greeted her, anyone attempting to cause a disturbance would be either beaten and bounced out or suffer an only slightly different retaliation before being bodily removed. "I suppose, in the face of current events… I should be a bit clearer for why I came back."

From the sideways glance he got, she was mildly surprised to hear it.

Renato scowled back at her, because he was not that…

…well, he kind of was. Not to her, he had been decently straightforward to Sonya. Mostly.

Occasionally.

"There's only a few mountain roads out of here, not counting the coast tunnels and the sea. They're all already staked out, and there's no local train line either." Either a new group, or a slightly lagging one, showed up while he was attending to more important business. Then, because of course his luck was that horrible, some moron had the bright idea of joining forces with the others in order to kill him… and waved off the inevitable backstabbing-fest that would result in the end as 'we'll deal with that once he's dead'. "Forgive me for dragging them through here… but as I can't get out the way I got in…?"

Bringing Cesare here wasn't a mistake, because the man was a dedicated sort once he decided upon something to see through. As the other Mafioso seemed entirely willing to make himself at home in her kitchen, with the eventual aim of a less than hostile but complete takeover of everything culinary, he would take care of that little disinclination she had to murder willfully without forcing her hand in case of the worse.

A not particularly desirable second option, if the hitman couldn't do it for her in the first place.

Most of that was the assassin being between major contracts, and not particularly against a new distraction of his passion before his network spat out a new job to work at. Half or more would be simple professional curiosity, being a European chef given an opportunity to explore and learn Soviet cuisine. A tiny bit might just be because Renato asked him to do it.
Although they certainly could've been a day or two quicker in getting here. Before those assholes finally got a few brain cells to rub together and join forces.

"They come through here, they're being looted of everything remotely removable." The thief informed him flatly, a tiny glitter of something lavender flicking through her natural grey eye coloring. "And maybe a few things attached they don't want to lose."

…it had been only days. Was that really all it took for a Cloud to anchor themselves to a location?

"You may wish to start in on that."

Sonya slid out from under his arm, pausing only to hook her purse on a shoulder, and wordlessly walked out of the church. He watched her go, before glancing at the same feature she had been studying so intently before he took a seat next to her. He had to wait a few moments and leave well after her, just in case there was a spy or three about watching his movements to see why he immediately doubled back here.

Although it was no wonder no one had managed to find and shift young Clouds before they got attached to their territories if that was the change only a few paltry days made. Sonya had at first been somewhat uneasy of her castle and the village, now she was biding her time among the people living here instead of in the grounds she owned and could control easier. Which meant it was likely already too late anywhere the moment young Clouds sparked their Dying Wills, or even something long established well before such identifiable incidents.

Then how did Daniella of Vongola gain that baby Cloud nipping at Tyr's heels these days?

If Shamal knew the child, enough to be aware of his 'original' name and not his handle and had a prior history with him, then he had to be one of the Flame orphans Vongola guarded from government and civilian attention. Was it something about the child that enabled his freedom from territory grabbing, or just something in how he grew up in the heart of a Sky's home ground?

Was it just merely luck, or the Eight's impressive war-hardened contact network churning out a priceless opportunity no one else ever had?

Well… Sonya had provided him a way out of her little niche here, might as well take it.

It was the numbers that made Renato wary, because idiots in concentration could always end up with that one lucky and perfectly placed shot to ruin someone's day. The more annoying and less skilled idiots had long since ran afoul of his globe-trotting, the merely opportunistic had gotten stumped by the varying foreign criminal structures and wouldn't have picked up his trail just yet. Those that were left were either better equipped or very damn desperate to take his head, and less moronic when given a gun and a target.

The decision to double up as well made it less likely something direct and frontal assault would run them all off, but on the other hand he had two opportunities to see what the thief did with tight quarters and large numbers.

Those poor, poor morons. He almost pitted them.

Almost.

He was rather more regretful he had to leave in short order, meaning he couldn't stay and watch.

(ooo000000)
"Why did you drag us all down here?"

"I haven't the foggiest." Cesare cheerfully informed the entire group, tipping a generous amount of red wine into the glasses. "Sinclair was rather abrupt when he advised getting out of the castle, left well before I could get a word in edgewise… and the lot of you are all hot gossip items around town as it is. So why not kill two birds with a stone?"

Adrik was a little concerningly white around the mouth, likely the somewhat injured Russian thief hadn't appreciated the bit of a walk to get down to Moneglia's beachfront bars. Verde seemed never happy if his minder/bodyguard wasn't, the other two Russian natives were too reserved to tell the overly winsome Italian to fuck off as more criminally inclined might… or just didn't have that much Italian language mastery to do it in his own language.

Which just left Hawk and Scruffy.

The man who wished he didn't know his past and the man without a personal history ended up the brightest conversationalist Cesare had by default, which probably said something about the people Sonya tended to collect like a particularly bad kleptomaniac.

"What do you mean by that?" Inquired the Sun gamely enough, since it seemed no one else had any idea what to do next.

The Storm was already halfway into his wine glass, so it was obvious he wouldn't be carrying on the conversation.

…actually, could he?

Was Italian a language he knew, or was it only French?

Without Usov around there was no handy language cheat to fake competence that wasn't yet earned, which might've ended up just hiding a few linguistic issues among them already, although it might be possible to ask the Mirror Lady to intervene if things got too awkward with the Russians.

It would be really bad if no one thought to ask Hawk if he knew the local language. Sonya might've, but then again with everything else going on she might not have had the time to seriously think through what the surprise dependent could do for her aside just supply manual labor when needed.

"I think he means for us to be seen, if nothing else." Offered the man in almost unaccented Italian as he studied the dark red wine thoughtfully, which solved Scruffy's momentary worry rather nicely.

"Your delightful dragoness of a boss has paid me rather handsomely to ensure any rumors spoken about you fellows, and the womenfolk, is as close to factual accurate and neutral at best as humanly possible." Allowed the chef rather helpfully, leaning back in his bar chair with a broad smile. "I can assist Afanasii well enough, he's seen and while not a particularly chatty type he has the appearance of either a bruiser or a victim. As he's honestly a victim, enough it shows and puts the locals at ease."

That was… a little oddly worded to Peter's ear. "What if he hadn't been?"

He smirked instead of answered, which probably was answer enough.

The opportunity to stop and sit for a moment, and half a glass of wine even if he looked to
desperately want it to be vodka instead, greatly improved Adrik's color. The alcohol also appeared to
deaden some of his pain, going by the less ramrod straight posture he eventually acquired. "Verde's a
lost cause, just accept that. The man might be brilliant, but he's horrible with people."

Cesare's inquiring glance was met with a completely stone-faced glower, which probably meant the
Lightning was not feeling particularly helpful nor verbose. Or feeling insulted.

It was sometimes rather hard to tell which.

"Haven't had a whole lot of time to teach him to act right, mostly he's just the lesser threat in an
incident. The fact he's not much more substantial than Scruffy over there tends to help him a lot."

"A recluse, or two," added in the native Italian fairly with a glance back up the street to the castle
they had left not too long ago, "will not be particularly difficult to get around. As long as enough are
of known qualities to reassure the populace that nothing particularly shady or nefarious is going on.
Refugees from the terrible Soviet Union?"

"Please no." Adrik refuted almost instantly, drawing a hand down his face tiredly. "That'll be
attention grabbing to a point we all probably all won't like. Get enough attention…"

"It's either that or political dissidents, this side of your Iron Curtain no one would believe you have
simple locational desires to be in another country." Cesare's eyes slid to the side, narrowing slightly,
before the man abruptly straightened up and picked up the wine bottle again. "Refills, gentlemen?"

"Sonya moved down here for her godson." Peter informed the other man as something he could use,
erjing when he realized there was a waiter with a new bottle approaching their little outside patio
table. "...uh, the rest of us just saw an opportunity. Because... well, she does pay very well."

In more currencies than just money. Which didn't really go into why he remained, but if they were
using 'civilian' friendly excuses…

"Oh, I know!"

"My case is a touch different." Hawk allowed faux-idly, draining off his glass and accepting the last
pour from the original bottle. "Amnesia, almost total. Of course, the 'dragoness' couldn't just leave
me there. Almost too nice of her, really. Don't even know if I had another job somewhere... or
family. Don't know what I'd do if I learned about any later, either."

"I believe..." Maximillian offered haltingly, wrestling with his own tongue to fully pronounce the
Italian words as he expended a lot more mental effort than the rest of them had just to speak, "...the
Mirror? Lady. She had, a bad... home."

...wait, really?

Their accountant shrugged, switching to Russian for the fluency, which told Peter he said that aloud.
"She and Usov tend to talk a lot, and Usov forgets we're not of their 'type'. Never figured out if he
did that on purpose or not."

"Probably." He spent almost a full school year trying to teach Mists things about science they could
just shortcut entirely with their abilities. Convincing them to know the basics they were less than
interested in resulted in a few rather whimsical arguments... that still gave him headaches to recall.

He failed more than he succeeded, too.

It might've been all part of Usov's plans to reassure his parents about his involvement with a Moscow
thieves' clan, or it could entirely be because the younger Mist held no wariness about his parents' concerns over his antics. Or it could have been bait to see what his parents would do with that information.

Flipping a coin would be equally as effective as picking one of options, likely with a greater chance of being right.

"Practice makes perfect." Adrik advised the other two Russian natives in the local language, with a sympathizing grimace. "It'll suck but sticking to Italian will help you more in the long run that taking shortcuts."

Maximillian's response was just a flat expression, which made the criminal crack a somewhat painful sounding laugh in his face.

Verde suddenly making a strangled noise drew everyone either out of the conversation or from their glasses, just in time for a streaker to dash past their patio.

It was just so utterly out of the blue even Cesare leaned backwards dangerously on two of his chair's legs, apparently so he could actually ensure it was what they saw or get a better look. The normally chatty chef returned his furniture to a proper position with a pensive half-frown on his face to share with the rest of the table. "Well... that happened."

Hawk made an unconvinced hum, eyeing his wineglass as if it had personally betrayed him. "...how much wine did we have?"

"Not nearly enough, I think." Insisted the Italian, topping off both his own and the Storm's glass without needing to be asked.

Actually, that streaker kind of reminded Peter of something Galina told him...

"Is... everything alright out here?" Inquired one of the waiters, which likely proved the atmosphere around their table was being watched by at least several others inside the bar and out.

Of course, the poor boy was just in time to also see the next set of clothing-free runners. This time the slap of skin on stone herald two rather panicked looking muscular men running past, going the opposite direction the last one had been going.

Adrik leaned back in his chair to see the gaping kid clearly. "I didn't think this was a clothing-optional beach..."

"...it's... not."

"Another bottle, please." Almost begged their chef, looking somewhat disgruntled now. "And could you kindly put in a call to the local constable? There seems to be several rather disruptive types doing sacrilegious things on a holy day."

There was an utterly blank moment on the waiter's end, yet another streaker a bit more panicked seeming than the others running by in the meantime, before the obviously overwhelmed teenager bobbed an almost nervous nod and turned woodenly around to go back into the bar. "...of course."

"Sinclair knew this would happen." Sulked the native Italian of their number, glowering somewhat alarmingly at the two empty wine bottles they had gone through so far.

"Um..." Peter unintentionally offered, wincing when Cesare shifted a rather irked glare on him and firmly lowering his tone to keep anything he said between the men here alone. "To be fair... he
"And what, exactly, do you base that assumption off of?"

"The first time, well… that was disastrous." And bloody. "The second, he wasn't around for. The… uh, she didn't particularly like something happening and did the same thing as… this. Supposedly."

"Supposedly?" Questioned Hawk, jerking a thumb to the main beachfront street they were looking out over. "You mean-

"I only know this second-hand. And… Galina was laughing too hard to really make clear everything that was done." Which also didn't mean the hitman-type hadn't known this was possible, there was a lot of Sonya's time that Peter wasn't present to witness. "But apparently there was another 'rash' of unwilling nakedness before, in China."

"Galina only laughs hard enough to be unable to speak when she's got a hand in someone's massive misfortune." Adrik pointed out for him, then drained off his first and apparently only glass of wine for the evening as he pushed it away before it could be refilled. "So… that doesn't really say if her local gentleman caller knew or didn't know this might happen when advising a night out to Cesare."

Afanasii and Maximillian exchanged a pair of looks, which being fathers might actually have something other than amusement or complete confusion to be based off of.

"Well, true enough." Allowed the Sun fairly. "Even if he did know, there's also enough of another possibility-"

"Not for what she's assumed to be." Corrected the so-far silent Lightning blandly right over him. "There is more than enough literature already around to hamper the assumption that 'disastrous' and 'their territory' goes together in any way."

"So… did or didn't the man set us all up to be flashed a few times?" Inquired Hawk almost curiously of the entire table, seemingly the only one that found the entire situation more amusing than confusing or alarming.

His question got unintentionally punctuated by the sounds of distant sirens and a whole mass of inadequately dressed men storming down the street. Some had apparently found a few unguarded clotheslines, although the inventiveness some of those articles of clothing required in order to be 'worn' was… something.

Not nearly enough of something, but something.

"Yes. I am aware of the counter-argument of possibility, but if there was the possibility of it then he knew full well. Likely hoped for it to boot." Insisted Cesare rather irritably, very pointedly not turning around to see the latest evolution of the night's entertainment parading past. "Jackass. Always has to have the last damn word, even when he's not here."

"Why are the two of you friends, again?" Inquired the only criminal Russian present curiously.

"We're not." Insisted the chef pointedly, elevating his nose snobbishly.

(Tuesday the 12th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
Breakfast today was actually attended rather well, even the Mirror Lady designed to attend before seeking her bed after a night of keeping an eye on things for her. Which probably just meant everyone had finally gotten adjusted to the local time instead of still be on Moscow's.

Nibbling on a spoonful of muesli, Sonya made a sort of half-bastardized headcount and checklist while she chewed the oats in half. Cesare's idea of breakfast was very pastry heavy, with an alarming amount of jam or sweetened cheeses, which kept the chef in the kitchen cleaning up after plating up his food and setting it out to be grazed at. The man had been very skeptical of the black tea but bowed to cultural differences if only to save a few ounces of his coffee beans in the meantime.

At least until he could convert the lot of them to the proper ways of taking refreshment, his words entirely.

Hawk seemed to not mind the Italian idea of breakfast, he was eating almost by himself with a mug of coffee and positioned just so to see into the kitchen and the two exits from the dining hall. Afanasii was sitting almost near enough to suggest a kind of support, a table away, with the rest of his family. Larion seemed a bit… uncertain, as he glanced around while chewing on his own pastry and listened to what his mother was telling him.

Odd. She probably should speak with the kid soon.

Maximillian and a surprisingly unburned Zinaida were eating at the same table as the young Rain's parents, although Usov was pestering Peter McScruffy right after the older man took a bite of breakfast instead of eating with his parents two tables away. Adrik and Verde had, per their usual, cornered an inside corner of the dining hall for their own use. One with tea and the other with coffee, but the two of them always seemed never more than a beat off of one another somehow.

Anna had opted for her own table in the inside corner on the opposite side of the Lightning and his personal Home Tutor. Tired upon the completion of another a night of keeping an eye on the stripped naked criminals after they regained some coverings and tried to figure out what the hell happed to them, the young Mist's motions were lagging as she somewhat mechanically ate her fill fastidiously.

If she was actually tasting whatever she was tearing to strips over there, Sonya would be surprised.

Thirteen people in a dining hall meant for upwards of twenty to thirty or so was… surprisingly empty feeling.

Finishing up with his cleanup, or at least letting the dishes soak for a moment or three, the assassin-chef abandoned the kitchen for a moment. Glancing around the dining hall, the Mafioso then picked to make a rather crooked line straight to her.

"So! Am I hired? Or should I end my rental agreement with the charming couple running the inn some streets down from here?"

The thief licked the yogurt off her shiny stainless-steel spoon, marveling that she actually had more utensils than her mother probably ever owned in her lifetime. "You can take a room on the fourth floor once it runs out, I suppose. You get the same terms as my other criminally employed minions, as long as you don't make me wait a week or so do whatever the fuck you need when you need it."

Cesare raised an eyebrow at her. "That's… permissive."

"Are you saying you don't want."

"Now, let us not be hasty."
Sonya waved her little spoon in the man's face. "I pay for the privilege of first-claim on your time as well as hourly busywork. I do ask you leave the summer months open, as that's when I really require a chef for most of the time, and otherwise exercise some restraint to prevent unneeded complications from following you back."

"Generous indeed..." Agreed the Mafioso after a moment, tapping a finger against his mouth thoughtfully. "And... who cooks the meals when I am otherwise distracted?"

"That would be between you and Mrs. Tolmachyova. If you both need a day or two yourselves at the same time, merely let me know in time to order catering or something for those unable to make their own meals." She scooped up half of what muesli she had left in the bowl, glancing past the man to Larion's aimless nibbling. "...or you could take on an apprentice."

"Oh?"

"Larion tried to kill me once." Allowed the Soviet Storm-Cloud fairly. "And I don't think he's got anything to do this summer."

Glancing backwards himself, the assassin studied the kid before glancing back to her. "Assassination work requires more than just guts, Miss Bazanova. Although I'll admit it helps a decent amount."

"I meant for cooking, but if you think he might be good for that then as long as he doesn't mind." Sonya hadn't any chance to pick her own career, if Larion ended up liking either cooking or killing himself then fine. If not, she'd think of something else for him to do... or maybe he'd find his own way himself.

Something about assassination-inclined or cooking Rains niggled a thought, but it slipped away before she could figure out what the hell that thought was about. Shrugging it off as inconsequential, she licked the last of her breakfast off her spoon.

"He might rather prefer helping his mom instead."

Cesare pursed his lips, looking contemplative and tilting his head slightly. "If you forgive me for asking... but why offer generous terms to what is really just an associate of a friend?"

"Because you are the associate of a friend." Realizing she was absently gnawing on the spoon, the Storm-Cloud yanked out the metal and critically inspected it to be sure she hadn't done worse than just impress her teeth into it. "I won't insult the both of us by pretending you're not worth the investment, and while you will be watched for at least a few more months..."

"Par for the course." Waved off the Mafioso simply with a flick of a wrist, sneaking a glance at the dented metal in her hand.

"...although," she observed lowly, flicking up a glance she was certain wasn't grey in color anymore, "I do expect to be informed if and when someone attempts to bribe you for either information or nefarious acts against the residents here. If only so I can make a... counter offer."

Humming with something that sounded pleased crossed with amusement, the chef gave her a perfectly charming smirk that did not reach his suddenly wary eyes. "Intriguing, and entirely likely. Will there be rubies involved?"

"I'd rather give you the sapphires, we really can't make much use of many, but if you would like the rubies more I can ensure a few find their way to you."

"Eminently acceptable alternative, any way it happens."
Unfortunately, it wasn't likely she could be equally as blunt and straightforward with the rest of the hires this castle needed. While she would really rather hand off the entire headache to someone else… she kind of also didn't want to.

…it was her stupid ass castle. Several of her various little minions lived here, so she might as well finish off the whole headache properly instead of half-assedly.

Which included figuring out what to do with the rather mountainous lands Bjørn also bought, instead of developing the castle's grounds yet more. How much space did honey bee hives need, anyways?

Were there limits on what kind of other uses the lands around them could be put for, or should they just leave it wild and open up hiking trails?

She wasn't going to bother pretending no one would go through that land, hiking trails would more or less direct the traffic instead of having any number of idiots going where they shouldn't. If made correctly, they could even divert anyone seeking an alternate path into the grounds here.

"If you want me to hire, or buy, a dishwasher or any kitchen staff before we expand the operation to include maids and the like… figure out what you need and how many you would like."

There was a very pointed glance at her abandoned spoon. "Is that wise?"

"If you're volunteering to do them all by hand."

"I think not. The lovely Ruslana shouldn't have to help me keep on top of the dirty dishes." Cesare looked mildly fascinated as she smoothed out the teeth marks in the metal with simply her thumb. "Is there any more of this… Flame stuff I should be aware of?"

"Usov is supplying a little linguistic assistance to the others and will be in charge of preventing the day-workers from noticing anything too objectionable. Anna's on night watch, and… well. Don't wander around at night, unless you don't mind the thought of a massive spider about the size of your head creeping around with you."

"…I beg your pardon?"

"Ask the Mirror Lady if you could see her Pavuchky." Sonya advised wickedly, returning the sly grin Usov shot her with a small wave.

The chef didn't have much time to think about it, Anna inserted herself in the table with a more awake smirk than she expected. "Would you like to see him? He's so cute and might nibble on your fingers but don't mind that. He's really well behaved."

She shoved the hand mirror the Mirror Lady wasn't without these days into his face, the thief was mildly impressed when he didn't immediate recoil or do anything more than arch a fairly confused eyebrow for what seemed both the action and the whole standing in the middle of a table issue. After a moment of studying the multicolored arachnid's reflected image, and probably whichever setting to know where not to go or how to find it, the Italian glanced up at the younger woman. "If I may… what kind of poison does he have?"

Poor man. Better him than her.

Sliding out of her chair, which the fifteen-year-old Mist promptly stole to start enthusing about all of her nightmarish pet's virtues to a captive audience that thought himself too charming to bluntly brush her off, Sonya snagged her breakfast dishes and left the Mafioso to try untangling himself from Anna's Flame-tangled madness.
She would come back and rescue him... in an hour. It was entirely possible the Mist would ignore her exhaustion now she had another possible spider-lover to talk to, and that wouldn't be healthy for the still growing young woman. Anna was more useful to her than the still newish chef, so he could suffer a little if it would please her.

It might turn out Cesare was being honest in his interest. In which case he could then suffer her Misty madness happily.

The young woman still needed to go to sleep soon anyways.

"Boss Lady, before you go." The Mirror Lady didn't even twitch when she shot her a mildly annoyed look, tilting her head back to the front side of the castle. "You have another caller coming up the drive."

...well fuck, she was popular all of a sudden.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 12th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"...Tyr?"

"Good morning." Greeted the Sword Emperor with a nod, wondering why it was she was answering her own front door. "I aim to inquire if your Lackey is available for outside contracts."

"I really do wonder. I know Mrs. Silvery-White has a man in town, and Renato just left a few days ago..."

"The news you are now in residence has traveled rather far in certain circles, yes."

Sonya drummed her fingers on the brass handle of her door, giving him a look to ensure he knew full well she didn't appreciate it in the least. Yet she still opened the doorway, gesturing some distance down the right-hand hallway. "Breakfast is still being served, if you would care to partake."

"I ate, however I would not say no to some coffee." With a half-bow to the mistress of the castle, Tyr stepped into the heart of her home. "Aside the say so, there was a rather bewildering incident not too long ago...?"

"If it was me stripping a number of Mafiosi because they were hunting a man through my fucking town, I might see about auctioning back their stuff if they want it. Eventually, and only if someone gives me a big enough bribe."

He paused mid-step, and not just from her dismissive offer.

"Anna, I believe we spoke about this."

The brunette young woman threw her arms around the curiously striped arachnid that was only dwarfed by the size of the table it was perched upon, bestowing the Russian thief an overblown pout complete with a jutting lower lip and bright indigo eyes. "But... but Master Cesare asked so nicely..."

"Pavuchky is probably tired and wants to sit in his web for the day, speaking of which you should be tired as well." Sonya apparently reminded her young Mist with the pet spider, glancing to the fairly bemused figure sitting across the same table from her. "And I believe Cesare has dishes to get back
to, Mirror Lady. Perhaps regale him about your pet later tonight instead of right this moment?"

The suspected Mist rolled her eyes, drawing back away from the still patiently sitting spider. "Alright Pavuchky, time to go home."

Tyr watched with marketed interest as the younger woman then held up a hand mirror, which was all the prompting the spider seemed to need to start moving almost faster than he could catch. It took less than a second for the arachnid to leave into the glass, and this 'Mirror Lady' to follow that disappearing act with her own by suddenly winking out of existence.

"Cesare?"

"I thought you left me here." Accused the Italian, not sounding disgruntled or confused but slightly amused.

"I did. However, could you make the Sword Emperor a cup of coffee?"

The man turned in his seat to see him in the doorway clearly, before turning back to Sonya. "The Sword Emperor is the 'Tyr' you and Renato spoke of?"

"What's wrong with Tyr?" Demanded the thief exasperatedly, shoving a hand through her lengthening blonde hair in frustration. "He's a perfectly well-mannered man."

A Cesare, who Sinclair knew, being asked to make coffee. Not entirely enough in his line of work to make assumptions based off of, but more than enough to go on for a social function. The Mafioso and Tyr studied each other, before the other assassin inclined his head to him with a wry smirk. "Of course, Miss Bazanova. Just a coffee? Or would you like another cup of tea as well?"

"Might as well." Allowed the woman tiredly, taking the Mirror Lady's empty seat.

Cesare offered his own for the Sword Emperor, striding off for the brightly lit kitchen a few others were emerging from probably after depositing their breakfast plates.

"You have an assassin working your kitchen."

"...is there something I should know about you Mafioso?" Sonya questioned somewhat archly, crossing her arms over her modest chest and giving him a pointed look. "What is with you all pointing out assassins? First Renato, now you? I didn't hire him to kill people, I hired him to feed them."

Tyr had to concede the point, although he was still unsure of drinking coffee made by another in his line of work. He did take the offered seat across from her, if only to be polite. "Lady Fiorella would like to know when you formally start accepting visitors, and if you would not mind supplying a home number."

"Already?"

"Timoteo bowed to the inevitable and informed her the slightly seedy underbelly we all work within."

"You might work somewhere seedy, I certainly don't." Sonya refuted surprisingly cattily, and pointedly looked out one of the bay windows that lit the large dining hall with more than enough natural light. "So, this question about my Lackey... what the hell, Tyr?"

"I need to move the Varia Assassination Squads out of Vongola home territory. We are starting to build up enough numbers to need more room than Nono set aside for me. As your man has already
combed through Italian real estate offers to find you a property, his discarded work would prove to be an invaluable starting point for my own needs."

Instead of answering any of the inquiries so far posed to her, the thief hummed lowly. Tyr's questioning look made not a dent in her disinclination to speak, and until he ran his mind back along the entire morning so far did he realize why.

"I, and the Varia, have no connection to the men you... inconvenienced." Neither did Vongola, but he held the strong suspicion she would not care a bit to hear it. While there were a few connections to the Vongola Alliance, he suspected she wouldn't care in that case either. "While I will pass on your offer, I cannot say if it will be taken."

"Björn, as well as the rest of my people, can make up their own mind about offers outside of my interests. You can entirely ask, and I can supply you with a number to call, but unless my Lackey decides to help you on his own..."

"Acceptable." Allowed the Sword Emperor, glancing to the side and taking in the assassin's expression as he slid a service tray holding both a small pot of her tea and a mug of black coffee. Sonya almost immediately poured herself a cup of the strong if slightly weaker beverage, leaning back with the teacup and giving Tyr a suddenly slightly amused look. "A moment, Cesare. Are you staying at least until lunch, Tyr?"

She very challengingly took a long sip of the steaming liquid, which didn't do anything to hide the smirk on her lips. "...if you feel so inclined to extend your invitation, I do have the time." Especially if he could convince her Lackey to supply what leftover research he still had to cut short his current headache.

"I only have two of the skull bowls done, mind you. But, I believe Mrs. Tolmarchyova made up a batch of kvass for borsht. Would you care to stay and try it?"

…if Tyr was inclined to profanity, he might've picked now for a few choice words to speak.

"Is... that what kvass is for?" Inquired the other assassin in pure bemusement, which did not make the offer sound any better. "I thought she was brewing something..."

"She was."

"Hmm... and do you mean the human skull bowls on the shelf Hawk installed in the kitchen?"

"I do. Tyr gave me them, isn't he thoughtful?"

"Well," allowed Cesare, not bothering to hide his amusement at this entire farce, "he is something indeed. I never made borsht before, how interesting."

"May I know what I've done to annoy you so, Miss Sonya?"

"Whatever makes you think I'm annoyed, Tyr?" She countered innocently, which did not match anything in her expression. "All you did was call upon my home unannounced, question my business in my territory, ask for a favor, and then questioned my taste in employees. All within fifteen minutes."

"I hear your complaints about my behavior, although I might point out you have an unregistered phone number still so the only way to speak to you is to call upon you myself."
"Which doesn't rule out sending a minion with a missive or writing a letter."

"Unless I was concerned he would be stripped to bare skin and made a fool of as was done to the other Mafiosi that trespassed upon you already, Miss Sonya. As for the letter, I was already local and could see to you personally instead of merely commit an interesting detail to something easily intercepted."

The thief studied his profile for a long moment, before blowing out a sigh and relaxing a tiny amount from the defensive body posture. "I am unsure if Mrs. Tolmacyova's kvass is actually ready to be used. So, if you find other more pressing concerns we may just have to excuse you from lunch Master Tyr."

…damn. "My most pressing concern is actually speaking to your Lackey, if only to know where to start finding myself a property of about this size or bigger."

There was a slow blink. "Tyr, I own the mountainside behind this castle."

The assassin considered that, sliding an unamused glance to the obviously eavesdropping fellow assassin who suddenly found something else to do very far away from them, then returned his attention to her. "Would you mind a rental agreement?"

She did not seem very amused by the suggestion.
Chapter 6

(Wednesday the 13th of May, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's apartment, Mafia Land.)

"Dama, I purchased that land for you. In case you decided the local village wasn't deserving of your protection." Björn informed his patron, a touch exasperatedly, as he tried to both carry on a fairly important conversation and run comparisons between two different if similar investment opportunities at the same time. "So you could ignore the locals or not as you feel fit, and yet still have the space to not feel stifled."

"…three thousand acres?"

He lowered a Chinese-local variant of The Financial Times slowly, utterly confused.

Did Italy even have that much land?

It wouldn't be out of the question somewhere like Siberia, or possibly the Antarctic, but Italy?

Dropping the foreign magazine and shuffling his collection of paperwork, losing track of his actual current copy of Financial Times, he found the property folder stuck halfway between his desk and the wall instead of with the important files he was going through.

Pulling out and examining the deeds, the Lightning-Storm carefully tallied up the total and blankly stared at the resulting number. "Three acres of the castle and grounds, almost three hundred acres of the coastline and mountain behind your home, three miles in rough circumference. Where did you get three thousand?"

No, wait. He knew perfectly well. He was staring right at it.

Most of that land was unoccupied and undeveloped, so he bought it in bulk which made a large number understandable… however on one of the deeds for the total area there was a comma where there should've been a decimal point. Which turned the summary of the smaller property's total land coverage into 'about three thousand' instead of the two point seven one five acres for the castle's grounds.

Although, technically, if one dug out that mountainside… it was entirely possible she did have three thousand acres. Mountains were big.

Whoever wrote the deed should be shot, their handwriting was atrocious. Given Sonya's disinclination for contracts or legal speak to the point she shoved all such work on him or Galina, a skim or scan through to just be aware of what she was signing would hook on the hard numbers rather than the dry and frankly boring language used in the deeds.

…huh. Viper could probably use this to argue they owned Italy outright. Probably. Wouldn't hold up in any kind of court, especially not Italian ones, but it might amused his financial tutor for a moment.

His Lady would not be happy to hear the same. Even if the mistake was understandable.

Contrary to his expectations, she heaved a massive thankful sigh on her end of the phone line instead. "So I can tell Tyr to fuck off and just buy the other half of the mountain, right? He's speaking
like he'd rent the damn land from me instead, and I'm not having a bunch of unknown assholes living out of my back yard when I've got impressionable idiot kids living with me."

Well… "...you have the only serviceable beachfront access to the sea between your property and the edge of Moneglia and Riva Levante, the next closest coastal town."

"I have a beach?"

"It's more a gravel-strewn stretch of sea-level land where they dumped the waste rock from boring out the car tunnel that goes under your castle's grounds, Dama. And not much of that, in the end."
Amended the Lackey fairly, unsure of the actual details other than there weren't a lot of open area on the cost of the mountain in question. He'd seen it scoping out properties, but he had seen a lot of properties in a short amount of time. "Speaking of, there's also on-going plans to drill a train line from Genoa to Florence through the mountains that should be almost to you? It'll... go straight on through a few meters behind the castle's bluff."

"So long as it's no going directly under us, I don't care." Dismissed the rather exasperated sounding thief on the far end of the line. "It's up to you if you want to accept the Sword Emperor's offer, whatever it ends up being. Did you send the money to cover those adverts?"

"Maximillian should receive the cheques either today or tomorrow, but yes."

"And we have an account to pay wages to part-time workers, right?"

"...day-shift, not part-time, Dama."

"Whatever. Anything else you can think of?"

"Your sister should be nearly there?" Besides that, Bjørn couldn't really think of much else.

He had a nice bonus from that teacup-Sky contract, most of which went into padding out the deficit from the Poseidon stock tanking as it had. Even more as he could do that one weird contract, the info-brokers were keen on renting time to look through the inventory books.

Which, and Viper would be proud, he was charging simply ludicrous fees for… depending on how much they had previously annoyed the hell out of him. Which was most of them.

Aside his work, she actually had income. When doing nothing but spending it.

"...Bjørn, why is my sister coming here?"

"Uh, she has vacation time?" Why was she asking him?

It was her sister!

Admittedly, he lived with Tatiana more than she did. Currently. Although it wasn't like the nurse kept him appraised about much aside medical checkup reminders and some weird questions about Lightning-natures.

"Fuck." Blinking, because he could've sworn she muttered something about 'needing a bigger bed', he peeled the receiver away from his ear and slowly hung up when the dial tone became somewhat annoying.

...he didn't want to know.

The Lackey eyed the mess he had just made of his previously barely-organized desk to double check
the property records, the mess which had dripped onto the floor like any self-respecting mess would, and sighed tiredly.

He hadn't written down the figures he had been checking, so now he had to start over again…

(ooo000oo0)

(Wednesday the 13th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Glancing irritably at the phone she just hung up, Sonya then glanced at the simple business card still in her hand. It was embossed with a raised clam shell and simply held a number in black along the bottom, Vongola headquarters’ number since Tyr apparently didn't have Lady Fiorella's extension.

She really didn't feel like calling more people, and there was the whole ‘Tatiana was coming' issue.

It was about two weeks until Shamal got out of school for summer, equally it should only be two weeks before her sister went back to Moscow to help their mother out with the schoolhouse. Well… two and a half weeks to go…

…no, she wasn't obsessing. Who asked?

Snorting at her own thoughts, because she was perfectly aware she was and lying to herself did nothing for anything, the thief tucked the almost blank cardstock into the back pocket of her jeans and went to find which of the two offices Maximillian picked to occupy.

The main phone line for the castle was on the ground floor, directly across from the massive dining hall. Across the hall in fact, in a lounge affair with a decent view of a whole lot of construction. Normally it would've been the far castle gates and the front lawn, but she was having some buildings put in so the sight was a touch ruined.

Which, she needed a very damn good gardener. Some topiary would section off a few personal yards from the 'main' castle ground. Maybe a fountain or something, if the view ended up being boring once a good half of it was cut off.

Maybe she should go wander around the mountainside. Just simply for something to do every day that wasn't violating someone else's privacy or wandering a comune she was kind of forced to protect.

…but she couldn't do that until after hiring new people to handle more skilled work needed around the castle, and after she did that she'd not want to leave them unsupervised while around her various minions and her minion's people.

Unless Tatiana wanted to chip in a little help. Faking like she would leave for a week or so would let her sister the opportunity to see how things would settle and work without the boss around.

"Lovely bossy Dragoness?" Cesare inquired from the kitchen, half leaning out of it with a politely inquiring expression, which made her realize she had slowed to a stop while in thought. "Did you need something?"

Sonya eyed him critically, and by the smirk that was slowly stealing across his face he knew full well he was skirting something personal. "...I need to ask Maximillian to find me a bigger bed."

"...oh really?"
“My sister is visiting soon.”

“…oh. Really?” Yeah, she could hear a lot of Renato in that question. The hitman would’ve reacted exactly the same way.

This time she could actually sort of understand why, mainly because Fong questioned the same subject when she was playing hostage for him and his Triad. “You realize that Larion's family all shared the same bed before moving down here, right? If Usov had siblings, he would've been sharing with them as well.”

“Well, that's markedly less interesting than I thought it would be.” Amended the killer chef with a disappointed sigh, fetching up against the open doorway in hope for a longer conversation. “Can I ask why, or is that cultural?”

“No, it just gets fucking cold in Moscow for half the year. It's also expensive to heat larger spaces during the winter, and a waste if you're not using it. Easier to huddle up than pay for extra coal or firewood during the spring if it runs long.” Even Lisa and Arseniy were really conservative about heating expenses, and they had a coal burner in the basement with ducts running under just about every floor to make it a touch easier on them.

Not to the point anyone had to crawl into their foster parents’ bed for the warmth, because neither sister had been that brave way back when, but it could get nippy in midwinter. Mostly solved by a heap of quilted blankets on each bed… which occasionally doubled as the place Sonya hid jewels between heists sometimes.

“That, is entirely and depressingly practical.” Sniffed the man, having the gall to pout at her.

“Very sorry.” Tossed the thief over a shoulder as she finally continued on her way, earning a bark of laughter before the chef went back to whatever he intended for lunch.

Beyond the dining hall, and the kitchen that took up only a quarter of the total floor space on this side of the castle, there was a back-hall type affair. Sort of a sitting room slash conservatory area, which had bigger windows than the rest of the building until she had all the windows and the windowsills replaced.

Indoor garden thing, then?

Whatever, the more important part was the two backroom offices. One was Maximillian's, and the open door made which rather obvious.

Zinaida was out and about still, unsurprisingly as apparently only the spring months were fit to move honeybee hives around or in. She had reassured Sonya yesterday that she’d actually put in some help with the castle once everything was set at least until next year and the arrangement of proper hives for her bees, but if she wanted an early start to her honey supply she had only days left to get it all done in.

Which was a nice thought, but they hadn't really needed Usov’s mother for anything majorly important. If the mead ended up being locally sold if it proved popular enough, or horded just because the Storm-Cloud really liked mead, was immaterial as long as the older woman was doing something productive.

Usov was sitting on a well-padded split length of crate propped up on what could entirely be stolen cinder blocks, reading a book she distinctly recognized as something she read around his age.

…hadn't that book been Lisa's?
"Maximillian, I need a bigger bed."

The man in question, not as thin as Verde or Scruffy but certainly not as well-built as Hawk and Adrik, looked up and scrutinized her only for a second. Probably remembering it was her money in the end, he just jolted down the order to give to Afanasii when he got back. "Anything else?"

"You might as well look into filling out the rest of the rooms with beds, there's no telling how many guests we might want to accommodate shortly," none if she had her way, "or visiting family and friends. My sister will be here soon, and it's either we sleep in the same room or we'd still need to pick up a new bed for her. My current one can be moved up to an empty room just in case, if no one needs it."

Usov looked up from the fiction book in his lap. "Can I have it?"

"...I suppose, if your parents don't need it." Allowed the thief after a moment. "Your current room will likely turn into guest rooms later on, so that would cut short some later shuffling of furniture."

"Usov, don't be greedy." Maximillian chastised, a frown being aimed at the shameless Mist blinking innocently back at him.

"She said if you don't need it, and they're getting really far with building the homes out there." Insisted his son simply, as if that had any bearing on his motives. "And, if I get my curiosity sated before we move out there, I won't try to buy one myself if it's too big."

The older man hesitantly glanced at her, and after a moment she kind of got the idea he was asking for either permission or something more related to the only other thing he knew she did with other Flame users.

"I'm forced to assume the more life-experience a Mist has, the better they are in applying their skills." She offered after a long moment of thought, enabled by the rapid nodding that almost certainly guaranteed it was a false assumption from the only Mist in the room. "Or applying their skills on other Flame users well aware of their abilities, making their Constructions more match with expected reality and less likely to be recognized for the fake image it may be."

Usov stopped nodding with his head tipped back, looking seriously contemplative in a way that made the hair on the back of her neck stand straight up. His father didn't really look all that comforted, but the possibility it would only help his son made him less against the suggestion on principle.

Time to bail out before the brat asked her to start testing some assumptions.

Scruffy should, and probably would, be delighted to help a former student develop his skills more. If not the Sun, then Verde would likely be highly interested experimenting with a Flame type he didn't have.

Either way, she was not taking that fall no matter how bored she was waiting out the building of proper habitation and moving woes.

Tatiana would be good for that, depending on the excuse she was giving for not at least calling ahead first.
"Nya!" Skipping around the weird new guy she didn't know, Tatiana quite literally threw herself on her baby sister's tender mercies… and her feet. "My ex got out on good behavior, help hide me?"

Sonya thought about it, ignoring her big sister sitting at her feet on her painfully hard marble stone floor.

"He almost caught me in Mafia Land, but I got to nope on out of there because Lisa is awesome and is letting me trade off with Avdotya about half a month early." Wrapping her arms around the blonde's thighs, the nurse fluttered her lashes up at her and just barely remembered not to set her chin on Sonya's stomach. "And I can also get a head-start on any medical checkups your various little gremlins need if you let me stay."

"Fine." Relented the Storm-Cloud with a sigh. "A call would've been nice, and not learning from my Lackey you were about here."

She winced, accepting the hand to pull her up to her feet and off her complaining knees. "Yeah, that kind of did occur to me… but do you know how rare it is for me to have any small coins in either my purse or pockets? And the phones out here are all pay ones, I only just had enough to call a taxi because I sure as fuck didn't know what train line to take."

She had about three one-cent euro coins left, and that was after turning out just about every pocket for change or money in a denomination Italy used and paying to call a taxi.

Speaking of… "Ah… you wouldn't happen to have a few lira bills here, would you? I kind of left the taxi guy unpaid to run up here."

When her baby sister opted to just stare at her blankly, the redhead huffed. "I'll pay you back in rubles, but I've got nothing he'll accept. Not even euros. I just wanted the hell out of there and I didn't want to talk to Nicolai."

"…why?"

Tatiana took a not-so-random stab in the dark, because she didn't think Sonya was questioning if she asked the taxi driver if he'd take rubles. "I know what he'll say, but he's not Arseniy and I'm not Lisa. Yeah, it might be the usual series of events for most the thief-couples who got split because of jail time back in Moscow, but I kind of want to heal."

She blinked at her a few times but did slowly start going down the right-hand hallway that went deeper than it appeared the left went. "Doesn't the airport have currency exchange branches?"

"I never bothered to learn to read Italian, little sis. I can't read English either, and my German reading skills are abysmal. There might've been, but you're safer and won't rip me off for not knowing the exchange rates." As her little sister merely gave an absent hum while leading the way into her very cool home, in both meanings of the word, she opted to actually take in the surroundings.

Hand painted fresco walls, sprawling amounts of marble, wrought iron chandeliers, and a minimum of furniture that did reveal how long someone had been in residence so far.

…she was kind of jealous. Just a little bit.

She'd never have enough capital to buy something like this castle. Especially not one perched on a
moderately spacious hill overlooking a *resort town* and the sea. Well… not until she became a surgeon, and probably not even then would she have the money for this kind of place.

However, this was old ground for her. Tatiana had spent a good portion of her childhood being jealous and petty about her little foster sister's situation, missing the whole point of her good fortune in being Sonya's older sister entirely by a good margin.

Or, more topically, as long as her baby sister owned this place it was *entirely* possible she could vacation here and not have to get involved with paying for it or maintenance woes.

…as long as she asked first. Might be a good idea to remember that detail.

"*Tats, Cesare. Cesare, Tatiana.*" Breezily introduced said baby sister to the guy with the pot of something interestingly tasty looking, then gesturing somewhat absently to the green-haired lady peering at the two of them from what looked to be a kitchen about the size of the common room in their apartment back in Mafia Land. "*And Mrs. Tolmachiyova, Larion's mom, this is my older sister.*"

"*Hi.*" She greeted obediently, pausing mid-step instead of continuing to follow her sister. "*When's the last time either of you had a checkup?*"

There was a moment of hesitation on both parties' end, and Sonya continued on unheedingly to likely fetch the money she asked for, before the guy called simply 'Cesare' set down what looked to be a bit of very tomato-heavy vegetable soup for lunch on a side-table. "*Is there a reason you ask?*

"*Professional nurse, Nya's also letting me stay here if I do all of them that are needed.*" She explained with a roll of a wrist.

"*Ah… well,*" hemmed and hawed the other new guy she hadn't met before, "*I don't believe I require one…*

"*Everyone needs one, at least once per year.*" Tatiana countered without humor, crossing her arms under her generous chest and pinning the man with an unimpressed look. "*Free of charge, no record if you don't want one, just simply a quick overview to catch anything developing or make a baseline to compare later checkups against.*"

"*For all of us?*" Asked Larion's mom, which stood to reason she'd want to continue any medical record her son had to keep him healthy well into his young-adult stage of life.

"*Yep.*" She agreed brightly, which didn't change the very professional 'disapproval' look she was nailing the other cook of her sister's with.

Which was exactly what Sonya came back to, counting out a couple ten thousand lira bills in one hand and barely looking up long enough to understand the situation. "*Tats, Cesare's one of Renato's… acquaintances.*"

"*I got tall, dark, and snarky to get one himself. You will not be as much of a challenge.*" Admittedly Doctor Kappel helped *massively* in his dour German way, but she could match that with equal annoyingness if need be.

Cesare blinked at her, the slightly-amused if stubborn look on his face falling off slightly before the man brightened himself with something approaching unholy glee. "*Good Lord, do you really call him that?*"

"*To his face.*" Tatiana agreed equally as brightly and with a smirk. "*I'm a Mafia nurse, if that's what you're worried about.*"
"You wouldn't happen to be staying a while, would you?" Inquired the man leadingly, which probably outed him as a Mafioso and another in their general line of work as well.

"Only for a month and a half." Swapping a large wad of ruble bills for the money her sister held out for her, if Sonya returned any extra or complained it didn't cover it would informed her exactly how irritable she was feeling, the nurse bounced off for the 'main' doors and to pay the taxi driver so she could get her luggage.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 14th of May, 1970 continued. Bagni Jolanda, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"You might want to think about a ground-floor aid station. Or maybe a second floor one?" Wondered Tatiana aloud, adjusting the straps to her bikini and settling happily into the lounge-chairs supplied by the little beach-club business.

"...why?" Inquired Sonya slowly. "I put the kit Lisa gave me under the kitchen sink... well, one of them."

Then again, the nurse might have a point. Especially with the volume of people she had.

"No, no. That's good. Better than good, that's being prepared. There's a lot of sharp instruments in the kitchen, so having something there on-site just in case is excellent, and there's a backdoor there too. But... you're thinking about groundkeepers, right? Then there's normal childhood scrapes, so something near the front door might be an idea, and falling down the stairs when moving heavy loads, so something on each floor might be also an idea..."

She blinked at her blankly.

Tatiana laughed a bit sheepishly in response. "I know, I know. You do have to remember a number of people aren't trained in any discipline, or even do more than walk for exercise. But then again, the whole point of emergency medical kits isn't to solve whatever ill... it's to prepare against them. Hopefully, they'll never be used. But then again, if they're needed not having them will suck."

"...how about, in exchange for a visit for two weeks every summer, you handle that?" Decided the Storm-Cloud irritably, scuffing a heel into the warm sand by her lounge chair more or less absently to scratch an itch.

"Really?"

The less she had to remember the better off everyone else would be in the end. "You'd find or invent a reason to come over anyways, wouldn't you?"

"Totally. Have you seen this beach?" Agreed her sister without an ounce of shame. "But then again, you don't mind."

Surprisingly enough, she didn't.

Tatiana was familiar and known, and in a household mainly full of people she only recently met or didn't really care much for that was somewhat relieving. Besides, the older woman's presence made things kind of more like she was wasting time for Bjørn to send her the start of another contract spree rather than simply aimlessly wasting time for no reason.

Okay, there was a reason. Didn't make it feel more productive than it was, supervisory shit she didn't
want to do and wouldn't have the time for it either. It was the whole point she didn't mind Larion jumping ship on her, his mom could be the head of household without her and without having to worry someone would try anything funny with the other criminal types living with her.

Her sister offered a crooked grin for her, stretching out to get every exposed inch of her into the sun as she physically could. "I know it feels weird, and a bit like trying to fit yourself into place when your puzzle pieces don't fit. But it's only because it's new, and that'll wear off."

"...did I leave you alone when you would've rather I be nearby?"

"Mmm... don't think about it like that." Dismissed the sunbathing Sun, batting a hand at her. "You and I don't really have the same reactions to things like this. Yes, I just know what you feel because I've been there before. But I dealt with it by... ah, just redecorating. I made it my own, superficially, painting my walls and shoving in my own furniture and all those knickknacks of mine. You, on the other hand, will likely require something more personal and less easy to do to feel fully at home."

Sonya stared into the sky over the sea, contemplating the advice.

"...if only because of course you'd need something more than I did." Snickered her sister, fishing out a pair of sunglasses to do the same without risking eyestrain. "Troublesome little sister."

"Says the one running from her ex to said little sister." Refuted the Storm-Cloud dryly.

"You might have a point, might. I'm ignoring it."

"Duly noted."

Flexing her toes, and watching the sea roll in and out again, occupied the younger sister until the older one thought up of something to ask some time later. Around the time she flipped over, to ensure her back got some color too.

"Hey, do you mind if I call Ganauche and tell him I'm in the country?"

"Why the fuck would I care?"

Tatiana shifted the massive length of her blood-red hair to hang over the shoulder that wouldn't block her view of her little sister, having opted to lay her lounge chair flat instead of leaving it only inclined like Sonya's originally started out as. "Because then he might come here. I know he probably knows I left Mafia Land, the CEDEF actually warned me my ex was on his way to the hospital and I wouldn't put it passed anyone with moderate intelligence to have them also call him with where I was going and why I abruptly left..."

"...so, is there a reason you're dating Ganauche the Defective or should I...?"

"He's not defective... or at least it's not his fault." The nurse started out with a strident tone, only to end up muttering the last into her forearm. "And no, it was my idea so him trying to fulfil his end isn't stalker-creepy."

Sonya pulled the lounge chair's support pin, dropping flat to join her sister in a way that would let them keep their conversation just between them with help of the unceasing crash of waves behind them and the general noise level a well-occupied public venue could generate. "What do you mean by that?"

The older Russian didn't immediately launch into an explanation, which caught and held fast the blonde's attention while she ordered her thoughts.
"His, Galina's, and even Verde's type are... they have a predisposition to be over-thinkers. You don't really expect Ganauche to be one, I know. But they all are a little too literal." The medically inclined Sun glanced over with a worried wrinkle in her forehead, not even reacting to the skeptical expression aimed at her. "Remember how Björn ended up with you? All the motivation he had basically boiled down to 'impress her with dedication, then I'll live better'. And he's Classical."

"...fuck." That would explain a few things about her Lackey, like how startled he could get when jolted out of his comfortable ruts. Going from a message runner, to her message runner, to her Lackey, into her financial advisor... he'd grown out of getting spooked bit by bit.

She had attributed that to growing either into an adult or more confident as her busywork man, and while both could entirely contribute it didn't necessarily mean the Lightning-Storm had no other contributing reasons to that lack of reaction as time went on.

...Björn had almost thrown up his stomach lining the first time they got stopped by the local police. The second time, in France with the PI, he'd barely been phased at all. That was either a phenomenally short adjustment period, Viper's fault, or something central to the teenager himself.

"They find one 'main' trait or use for their lives and dedicate themselves to that. Entirely. Every next step, every short-term goal, is all to that 'ultimate' goal. The problem is with their rapid learning curves or retention rates they pick it way too early. Kind of like you did, without the ability to shift what kind of thing you went after. They pick something, or get groomed for it, and then if they don't get it their whole lives fall apart..."

'Groomed' for a life's purpose?

"Guanche was repeatedly assured he'd be... well, what he is growing up." Tatiana offered after a moment of silence, a bitter smirk twisting her lips. "Him, and about the twenty other candidates Nono Vongola had for his type. He got it, sure... but what happened to the other guys?"

Sonya frowned at her sister, utterly confused as to why they would care about four handfuls of Italian Lightning Guardian candidates.

Aside her being the former principal of a Flame-orientated school back in Moscow.

...and she would be the 'proper' chain of communication to get new discoveries back there, if they were to ignore the fact Tatiana was as much Lisa's daughter as she was and could damn well call their mom herself.

"Did you tell Galina?"

"Well, not yet. That one's going to need... a lot of liquor and maybe a whole tub of chocolate ice-cream to help." Propping her head up on an upraised palm, the Sun gave her a small smile. "That's ancient history, though. We'll get to it when she gets here, and I noticed you didn't answer my original question."

"As we're currently sharing a bed, I'd rather he remain in the village for any visits." Allowed the younger sister slowly. "I won't strip him to bare skin if he visits here. But he better be on his best behavior."

"Thanks, Nya."

"I appreciate you asked first."

Tatiana snorted lightly. "It's your home, I'm just visiting. Of course I'd ask first."
(Friday the 15th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

A double delivery of both Peter's jewel-cutting and glassblowing equipment suddenly earned him the undivided attention of one very bored Lightning. They both bowed out of the continued book-sorting to deal with or investigate the checked delivery, much to Hawk's ire.

Verde spent an entire fifteen minutes inspecting the equipment for damage for him while Scruffy was putting all the gem-cutting tools into his bedroom, because it was really just a table-mounted grindstone with various attachments and grits available for polishing aside the chisel and small hammer for pairing down the rough edges, before assisting him with finding a suitable place outside to set up the glassblower's forge.

Of course, the man didn't do it silently.

For every question Scruffy answered while the two of them wandered the castle grounds, three were posed in rapid-fire.

No they didn't know if cut, clarity, or component elements had any effect on which Flame user could use what stones. It was half of why he had the equipment ordered, yes. The glassblowing forge and equipment wasn't for making fakes, but rather the manufacture of gemstones they could control the quality for either further testing or without the incredibly expensive price tag.

Then after ruling out the front courtyard and not just for the construction efforts no, he didn't know the chemical compositions of most gem-quality stones but he did need to research it now. Cuts and specific facet gems were the next to be empirically tested, although he didn't know who would be testing it now they were a bit removed from a mafia-sponsored academy for Flame users. He wasn't sure if Sonya would appreciate Verde having a look at his notes just yet, which was a moot point as the information wasn't here yet.

Which also lead into how he figured out it was possible to manufacture jewels, an interesting discussion about the origin of the manufacture of jewelry quality glassy stones back in the 1800s, and the only recipe he knew of which was for the undesirable and explosive sapphires. While they aimlessly wandered around the castle's ground floor to see if there would be an ideal space not directly under a window or something.

Finally the scientist broached the topic of the Moscow School, and the Sun gave the man a reproachful look instead of answer those questions.

The Lightning blinked slowly, then blinked again while tilting his head so the lenses of his glasses flashed in the sunlight, and obligingly changed the subject. "Where did you learn to cut gemstones?"

…not much better of a topic, really.

"A bit from my former life, a bit from being the unwilling guest of an illegal diamond cartel, and I'd really rather not talk about that either." Peter informed the man with a grimace, as he stepped out from under the small tunnel that went under the covered walkway connecting the castle to the six-car garage as well. "I think we should just ask Sonya for space in her garage."

"Not necessarily." He advised, pushing the round-frame glasses to sit higher on his nose. "You have a skill I find to be interesting, I will trade you some space in my laboratories for instruction in
mineral crystal manufacturing. I will even throw in my old geology notes from my formal instruction in the field, and the chemical breakdowns of such glassy stones as need be."

"…there's chemical compositions for jewels?"

"Everything has chemical compositions."

…well, fair enough then. Scruffy didn't really put a whole lot of thought into it, before something fairly major occurred to him. "You're going to need Sonya's permission to work on the gem-manufacturing with me, I think. I'm going to mainly, at first, focus on the types we do know will work for certain Flame types in hopes of narrowing down what enables that."

"Is there a list?" Inquired Verde almost tonelessly, which didn't work to conceal his interest in this topic. "If so, I might be able to save you some hours of manual labor and false-theories using the chemical breakdowns I studied once."

"Still, and again, you're going to have to sound that out with Sonya." Not to completely pass the man around or anything, but he didn't know what intents their boss had for the man. "If she says yes, then I'd really appreciate some help."

The other man's already green eyes gleamed with not-entirely-natural light, before the Frenchman immediately stalked off on him aiming for one of the backdoors to the castle.

Peter glanced around, which didn't really give him much view of anything too perfect to set up a personal-sized and side-opened crucible for glass blowing. All he could see was part of the retaining walls that prevented soil erosion under the walkway above, some parts of the lower back yard of the castle, and a bit of a stone wall that encircled the grounds.

At the very least, the conversation netted him another avenue of investigation before he could set up the equipment. If Verde could get himself included in the study, then an actually enclosed lab would prevent all the fears of some child getting into the forge without enough care for any molten glass being heated or cooled down.

Which would nicely solve this hunt for space and might get him someone other than Galina to talk to about further ideas he might have. The Lightning woman tried, but he knew she didn't honestly understand a lot of what he blurted out to her.

(ooo0000000)

(Friday the 15th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"How is your research efforts into French, or even Italian, views on Dying Will Flames going?" Sonya asked instead of answer Verde's apparently burning question.

"I utilized Adrik as an intermediate and have the compilation of northern French views waiting for your review. I have been, until this point, too removed to perform the same information gathering for northern Italian or southern French views of the topic. With Adrik's current condition and responsibilities, such can wait until a healthier individual is available to navigate the finer points of the investigation or a Flame-enabled member of the local criminal syndicates is available to answer inquiries."

That was… actually way more than she expected. The man could apparently multi-task with the best of them. "Alright. I'll take a look, and we'll call your end of the grant-thing a third of the way done."
Being the case, I'll grant you conditional access to what Peter's doing. As long as he wants the help."

The Lightning gave her a sharp nod, turning on a heel to stalk off and hopefully find his notes to give her.

She could use something new to read.

Afanasii was sort of getting into the habit of always bringing her back at least one new book every day, apparently there was a second-hand bookstore in the comune which helped him a fair bit in that regard. The man's first few bids of romance novels were regarded probably a touch too skeptically for the minor favor he didn't have to do for her, but she had a distaste for them ever since Tatiana bought her a dime-store novella that actually had the most unrealistic sex-scene she had ever read.

The phrase 'he tasted of chocolate and leather' still made her shudder to recall.

While chocolate was good... leather didn't have a distinctive taste. It was either the chemicals it had been treated with or whatever nasty shit it had brushed up against, rather than anything aside a texture. She'd held enough leather-reinforced gloves in her teeth to fumble with her lock picks to know.

...and she cleaned the fuck out of her gloves when and if she knew there'd be difficult locks in her way expressly in hopes to avoid exactly that happening.

Maybe it should've been evoking the scent of warm leather?

That was almost equally as distasteful, given Cherep's favorite kind of jacket and his ever-present motorcycle boots. Which he had been probably wearing for a week straight by the time they left Woodstock and smelled like it.

Sonya shuddered with disgust, caught Tatiana's interested look over the top of her few Italian romance novels she was using to learn to read the language, and stuck her tongue out at her sister. "Should I get an x-ray machine?"

"Kind of impractical, even if I'd like one of Adrik's lungs right now." Mused the Sun, getting back on track instead of asking what had gone through her little sister's mind for that reaction. "I mean, aside splints and sterilized bandages... the best you should have on hand is painkillers and anti-allergy medication. A lot of people are allergic to bee stings... with a couple IVs of saline solution, for alarming amounts of blood loss, and that is probably the best you can get away with without earning a couple questions from the authorities. And even that would earn a raised eyebrow without background detail."

"The stupidly overstocked med-kid Lisa gave me is outright illegal, given how much morphine is in there." Pointed out the Storm-Cloud practically. "As long as I'm not risking more than a fee for being in possession of controlled substances, I don't see a reason to go lightly if there is a possibility it might be useful."

"The kit's Russian, and do you want to bet on if anyone from the Soviet Union would confirm what is in standard home emergency medical kits to someone capitalist like a dignitary from Italy?" The redhead merely shrugged at her, frowning prettily at the book in her hands out of confusion rather than irritation. "Do I really have to write down emergency guidelines? Can't I just tell you and you write it in the native languages?"

Tossing the book to the side of the couch she wasn't sitting on, lightly enough that although she
glared at her there wasn't any damage to get huffy about, Tatiana stole a pad of paper from out from under Sonya's hands.

Without waiting for the answer to that.

She sighed, giving up on maybe teaching her sister to read Italian. Even if she really should know how, or the book being one of those romance novels she might be interested in more than her, or for something moderately interesting to do.

Shamal only had two more weeks of school, and maybe there'd be another graduation thing so she could go get him a few days early.

…she should call Bjørn again, to see if there was anything sent there for her about said possible graduation event. Otherwise Renato would have to tell her, whenever he got back form whatever it was he was doing.

Which was likely setting up a suitable 'death', so she immediately changed her mental track onto something else.

Anything else.

Like… Shamal. She should get the kid some basic furniture until they could customize his room as the kid wanted. Well, by 'her' she really meant Afanasii. Which also included whatever she was going to need for puppies, dog training manuals or the tools to keep them fed and well groomed.

Indoor or outdoor dogs?

Sonya glanced around, over Tatiana's head, at the developing second-floor sitting room. There was an old couch that apparently had been here when Bjørn stayed to be basically a gate-opener for the construction crews. It was old as fuck, however.

She would not care if a pair of young dogs chewed on the furniture. As long as they were being put to some use, they could chew on it all they wanted. Just the one or two, more than that and she might find it more annoying than anything.

That couch needed replacement as it was, there was only a small amount of still-building linens to cover all the beds and serve as towels as needed. Which was for someone else, who probably already knew and couldn't find an acceptable replacement or more linens. Maybe she should turn that mirror room in her bedroom into a sewing closet or something… although she didn't find sewing a relaxing hobby, she could get on making some of the things they still needed herself.

Maybe she should go request some yarn and knitting needles too.

The suggestion of decorating with her own knickknacks kind of seemed something she was interested in, but just her own books didn't seem to be cutting it. Her library was slowly filling out, and she really needed to give Hawk something else to do before he decided to set it all on fire in spite of any revenge she might dish out, but even the few hallway bookcases slowly losing whatever shelf-space they could didn't make it feel anything other than just a building to her.

If she knitted her own blankets or something, to decorate with, perhaps it'd feel more her own home.

It wasn't like she had anything better to do with her time.

Tatiana suddenly sprawled out over what had to be an incredibly unfortunately placed couch arm just to lay her head and a massive length of her unbraided hair on Sonya's shoulder. "It'll just take time,
"Nya. Stop stressing out about it, you'll get there. You have more than enough time to spend, especially with bambino's summer vacation almost here."

"I'd like to no longer be aimless." When was the last time she had nothing to do?

Not just nothing important, but absolutely nothing to do but wait?

…oh yeah, the Triad hostage thing with Fong.

She definitely didn't want spending time 'at home' to be equated with that disaster of a contract's worst parts. The simply sitting around part.

"Hey, wait, where are you going?" Squawked her sister in alarm when Sonya very nearly knocked her to the floor instead of remain sitting there.

"I'm going to go find a fabric shop." Pausing just long enough to right Tatiana, because the knocking over thing was probably her fault entirely, she padded out of the mid-way sitting room on the second floor positioned between the six other bedrooms on this floor.

One of them had to be for Shamal, but she could entirely appropriate one into a place to stick fabrics or yarn for her knitting/sewing hobby. Once Verde moved out of that corner room, it would have more than enough light to help her see stitches. Bonus, if Shamal took the connected room across the bathroom then the kid would have a private bath of his own.

The Lightning might still be in residence here when the brat moved in with her, until then she could use that room with the hidden door into her bathroom to work in.

"…ooh, shopping. Wait for me!"

"Did I tell you I can sew?" Wondered the younger sister as her elder caught up with her.

"When did you pick that up? Where?"

…because Crina was a bit of a bitch and used it to test her tolerance for both the work involved in being part of a traveling circus and for being ordered around. The Storm-Cloud didn't feel like bringing the old dead bat into things, so instead she started with and kept to the less painful events from her two years with the Großes Volksfest as they went down the central flanking staircases.

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(Saturday the 16th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

A delighted yell of 'Ganauche' was the only warning he got.

Tatiana didn't just 'basically' jump him, she hit him going full speed and wrapped both arms and legs around him to boot. The Lightning Guardian very narrowly avoided getting knocked off his feet, and only because he fell backwards against the armored car instead of go ass over heels all the way down to the drive.

If she did this kind of thing often, then it was a good thing she was a nurse. Even better that she was a Sun Flame healer in her own right.

Drawing back just to beam at him, the redhead glanced to the two women he agreed to 'escort' out
here. "Well, that didn't take you long at all."

Aww… no kiss?

"My," observed the still-bitchy as hell Nilda Superbi rather tartly, eyeing the new woman with a measure of wariness for jumping a Mafioso without care to the unintroduced unknowns nearby, "that was quite an entrance."

"Mrs. Silvery-White, my sister Tatiana Primakova." Introduced a vaguely annoyed looking Sonya Bazanova flatly, also descending the steps but less hurriedly than the Sun. There was also a very pointed show of hefting a gold ax on a shoulder while she did so, but he was ignoring it out of respect to his still very bruised pride. "Lady Vongola, Fiorella, my older sister. Tats, the wife of Timoteo Vongola. The lady that sent you those silver heels."

Then the lithe blonde spent two seconds just looking at the somewhat stiff acting wife of his Sky, making a kind of dissatisfied but equally sympathetic sounding noise.

"Right, I know that look. You might want to follow me." The Soviet Storm-Cloud gave him a dismissive kind of glance, before taking Fiorella's arm to gently lead the lady away from them and the driver trying to figure out where he should park the car. "Tats, either debauch Ganauche or get off him. Then go tell Cesare to make a few local 'comfort' foods for dinner."

Tatiana snorted at her little sister ordering her about, turning back to give him a wry grin while very pointedly not moving off him. "Sorry, but Nya's feeling out of sorts and I never realized exactly how hard it is to keep up with disgruntled Clouds. I'm fucking tired."

"It's not a problem." Ganauche found his tongue in time to insist, very truthfully, finally hoisting her up into a position he could hold her in and walk. Sort of, it was more of a shuffle. "She won't take it easy on you because you're her sister?"

"Eh, the first day was fairly tame. We went to the beach and all, after I got here. But yesterday?" She sighed, sliding down him to stand on her own feet again just before he got them to the front stoop of her sister's castle. "We started trying to plan something out, medical stations for any accidents, you know? Then… something got into her. She spent the entire day just wandering the local town's streets and stalking out some fabric stores, half of it wasn't even shopping. Just watching, finding new vantage points to do said haunting around in, and then investigating the people on their day-to-day errands."

Not entirely what he asked, and frankly he was glad she didn't take him seriously when it wasn't remotely like that, but informative. For something.

Ganauche didn't know what Visconti would make of it and was of two minds about reporting anything to the Cloud Guardian when he checked in later tomorrow. Especially if it would earn them more ire from this particular Cloud.

The nurse gave him a full-blown pout, before her eyes slid to the side and she got a lot more serious. "She didn't even buy anything… and wow that Rain-woman is good. When did she stalk off?"

He glanced around himself distractedly but didn't expect to see a flash of silver anywhere as a rather wiry Russian gestured for the driver to move the car over to a lower building with a walkway connecting it to the castle. "She's Lady Fiorella's bodyguard, so probably to tail after your sister and her charge almost immediately when they walked off. Did you buy anything?"

"Of course I did, silly! Ooh, some of it's really good, too." She whirled around, smacking him with a
long length of blood-red strands of her loose ponytail, then just whipped around again to face him instead of do anything. "I don't think Nya will appreciate you being invited to our room, but you can wait on the landing while I show it off."

'Our' room?

…bad idea to think about, Sinclair would likely punch him in the mouth again if he ever caught on to his wondering how that worked out.

"Your sister asked you tell a 'Cesare' to make-"

"Right!" With a grin that told him that she had forgotten, and appreciated the reminder, Tatiana tugged him by the hand into the surprisingly not-gothic or gloomy looking castle. "Kitchens first."

…why did Tyr call this 'Death' Castle, then?

It was outright cheerful. Almost disgustingly so for the lair of a temperamental Cloud, and also jarringly busy with construction efforts. The master assassin could not have missed that, nor a 'out of sorts' mistress of the property.

Maybe it had to do with some French-related reasoning, given which language was used to title it.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 16th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Sonya guided Fiorella to the back courtyard of her castle, then felled a moderately sized almond tree with almost an absent swing of her still present ax. Stepping backwards, she offered the wife of Nono Vongola the weapon hilt-first. "Go wild."

The married woman and mother of three children glanced at the impractically gilt-metal weapon, at the tree that crashed to the ground with a rather ear-spitting racket, then delicately accepted the Cloud's weapon and focused on the felled tree with some disturbing intensity.

Nilda blinked at her charge's back, watching rather bemusedly as she took the opportunity to vent with gusto. "...how did you know to do this?"

Instead of immediately explain, the thief now standing next to her simply dug around her pockets for a pack of cigarettes and offered her one. They both waited out Fiorella's single-minded intensity to chop the most wood any one woman could realistically do with civilian limits in an hour, after the Storm-Cloud very exasperatedly taught her a key elemental fact about what having Dying Will Flames meant for starting fires.

It took three hours, for the older Italian woman to exhaust herself chopping wood and for Sonya to start speaking.

"I had the same look in my eye about from age five to about... eight. Then again about a year ago, but the reflection at that point... well, it was a little tainted by my Will." Puffing hard one last time on the third cigarette since they came out here, she stubbed it out in the grass before pocketing the filter end. "I know what it is, but aside this part I'm guessing. I swallowed it instead, myself. Or tried, anyways. Needless to say, don't do that."

Breathing hard, and a little unsteady on her feet, the wife of Don Vongola put slightly more emphasis on her last swing of the improbable ax to lodge it into the part of the trunk she hadn't gotten to yet. It
promptly shattered the moment she turned her back to it, in wisps of lavender Flames which sort of explained how a gold-metal ax stayed in shape enough for an edge to be useful. "I apologize, Sonya. I didn't intend-I, I just wanted to welcome you to Italia not... not more of this."

"We needed firewood anyways... eventually." Interrupted the thief blandly before she could continue, jerking a thumb backwards to the backside of her castle. "I have a full bathroom to myself, well... myself and my sister. I don't think we'll care if you'd like a really long hot bath now."

Fiorella huffed a rather breathless and tired laugh, but then alarmingly she started to tear up as she picked a way to the flagstone path leading into the back-patio of the castle. "He lied to me for eight years, after I had three children with him, and every day of five years of marriage. What the fuck?"

"You should slap him across the face." She advised somewhat levelly, somehow inching backwards to the castle without lifting her bare feet or ripping the grass out by the roots. It was paired with an almost panicked look darted to the panels of glass making up the windows facing them. "Hey, Tats! You there somewhere?"

As the redhead obediently emerged from what seemed to be a kitchen door, the three of them somewhat made it to the fieldstone bracings a rather charming garden plot. That was where the civilian woman picked to stop even if the other two would end up leaving her there, just looking both exhausted and fairly miserable overall as she leaned against the thankfully stable looking stonework.

Nurse Primakova eyed the woman curiously but showed a lot of tact by not asking anything but for what reason her sister called for her.

She pointed at said miserable woman, which slightly ruined that non-comment's attempt to respect said woman's privacy. "Hug."

The Sun first huffed at her before moving to do as asked. "You know, Nya, you won't break out in hives if you hug someone."

"No, but I might just break them in half with an ill-timed sneeze. And there's a lot more pollen down here than I'm used to living with." Snarked back the younger Russian sister, with a roll of her eyes and defensively crossed arms to go with the whole petulant baby sister act. "I'm going to go run her a bath, take her up to the master's when she gets her breath back."

Nilda glanced from her charge, who had happily accepted the unknown woman's offered hug with abandon and was currently outright sobbing into the redhead's generous chest, to the blonde's retreating back. She really wanted to know the rest of this, because if she got this upset she'd just kill the offender and call that it. Which, given who Fiorella was upset with, was not remotely a good idea and stopped her from doing something similar with just a knife and maybe vegetables. Figuring out how Sonya knew what this was, and all the parts she knew of for later identification and use, was a pressing concern.

…but that was an unknown. A nurse, admittedly… but a Mafia Land nurse.

Sonya's elder sister.

With unknown skills and her own thoughts about something as sensitive as marital-problems in Vongola's highest ranks.

Who seemed entirely alright with being used as a living pillow by a woman that couldn't be remotely familiar to her.
And the woman was either dating or 'seeing' Ganauche. Where was the damn Lightning Guardian? 

She got her answer when the man wandered out of the same doors the nurse used, nibbling on some kind of dark bread slice. Upon seeing the situation, the Lightning Guardian paused a full moment.

An actual full moment, rather than the simple hitch she would've expected from a Lightning like him.

At least the man was still paying attention, even if he was distracted slightly with what his 'lady friend' was up to with his Boss' wife. Pointing at him then motioning for the Mafioso to stay put where he was, she twisted on a heel to go see what Sonya would tell her about how to prevent another of these rage-induced breakdowns.

….or how to identify and solve it in other forms, the best she knew how.

"Straight through the other set of doors, up the stairs, immediately take a left. All the way down the lounge-like landing is the door to the master's bedroom. The master's bath is through Sonya's bedroom."

Giving the slightly amused looking Primakova a nod to show she heard her, Nilda entered the other doors not clogged with one of Nono's Guardians.

It was a rather quiet place, almost more like a high-end library than a lived-in castle. There were a few bookcases lined against a few walls that helped with that impression, all that paper and stiff leather fouled the echoes the marble floors could throw off. That was all on the ground floor, she kind of wondered if that feature extended to the next.

At the very least she knew for a fact no one was walking near her, though that might not be a comforting thought. Depending on if there was someone waiting for her instead.

Following the directions given to her and trying to ignore the nerves trying to rise for basically invading a Cloud's privacy without permission like this whole farce of a visit ended up as, eventually had her knocking on a pair of doors with bright brass work handles.

It didn't exactly fit with the older and darker metals used elsewhere in the building.

Before she could follow that thought all the way through, she only got to new and likely including either a lock a thief trusted or one difficult enough to force open to alert the occupant with enough time to react to, the door opened.

There was a distant sound of running water, but the Rain was a hell of a lot more interested in the woman that did the opening of said doors. "Seriously, how did you know?"

Clouds were not what one thought of first when thinking of emotionally balanced creatures.

"I've been there." She simply repeated, not looking very willing to either invite her in or join the ex-hatchet woman on the second floor's elongated landing. "Of course, I had to beat the shit out of kids around my age for the stress relief… or put a burning hole into a city block. Why didn't you just give her something to stab?"

"I was a little worried she'd stab Nono." Her first instinct was right?

Nilda felt a bit weird, and really confused, hearing that. Almost like she had blown the whole thing out of proportion, which wasn't the case. Fiorella's state of mind was equally as much her concern as the woman's physical health, and it was obviously really poor right now. Enough to be concerning for anyone with two, or even one, eyes to see it.
"You are a Rain." Pointed out the Storm-Cloud when she heard that particular recent irritant of hers. "Maybe you're equally as obsessive over emotional or mental health as my sister is with physical."

"I have never-

"Yeah, that's about right. Discord like being upset is pretty much Rain-bait, especially personal discord, and has the opportunity to make us obsessive if we remotely feel involved somehow."

Interjected a brunette child wandering his way to the staircase, not remotely too bothered by the short look she threw him for entering the conversation without being invited.

"That is Larion the Rain. The former head of the Rain training section back in Moscow." Sonya introduced her with an absent wave. "Larion, Mrs. Silvery-White."

"Must you?"

"Yes."

Wait… former head of the Rains?

Turning to actually see the child, the disturbingly young boy, she got a fairly skeptical eyeballing back through the wooden railings back for the effort. "Why a child?"

"I killed the second one I got, and the one next was utterly ineffectual as a leader. So, we ended up with him." Tossing the kid a look of her own, she nodded to the lingering child Rain to continue on his way. "Larion, ask Cesare for a tray for four of us to be sent up instead of wait on us until we get in for dinner to clean up."

"Can I ask why?" It was likely no, but if so then asking wouldn't cost her anything-

"The first one got arrested, and I really disliked his successor." With that non-answer, Sonya pinned her with a fairly suspicious look. "Mrs. Silvery-White, not that I mind all that much right now… but why the fuck are you all here?"

"Fiorella's been… 'reconnecting' with her parents and introducing her sons to them. The Superbi are the closest Alliance Famiglia to her parents, and my husband didn't mind putting her up for a few weeks for this." Nilda pressed the palm of her right hand against her forehead, well aware she was not put together enough to match wits with a 'discomforted' Cloud with Storm tendencies. "Nono Vongola finally told her… everything. In detail."

There was utterly no reaction from the other woman.

"Obviously, she's a little distraught. And confused. And… rather rightfully pissed off with her husband, a little bit with her mother-in-law, and just about everyone else remotely around at the time the dishonesty had been reinforced around her." Which was obvious given what little the older Italian woman managed to tell the thief before her emotions got the better of her. "We really only came by to visit for coffee before going back, once the Sword Emperor stopped by the Superbi headquarters to see us himself and she learned you were nearby."

"Interesting and all, but not my problem."

"No, it's not. And I appreciate you letting her to chop apart one of your trees for her own health." Holding up her left hand, Nilda spread her fingers wide to beg a few more moments of explanation. "Being that I am part of those that lied her, Fiorella wanted to check a few things with a fairly neutral individual that hasn't yet… well, lied to her. You didn't exactly tell her the truth, but-"
"Amazing what not lying to someone's face prevents you from suffering." Drawled the thief, utterly sarcastically the longer her patience was taxed further than polite. "And if she's asking me, I'm telling everything that I know. As long as she can ask the question. Still not enough of an explanation."

"We just came so she could ask a couple questions, have a cup of coffee with you and apparently meet your sister, then go until you wanted actual visitors. But Ganauche being added in last minute by her husband kind of tipped things over into... well, that disaster. And the man had an actual reason to tag along, one she was actually at first not entirely unhappy to hear."

Sonya still looked really unconvinced of anything. "Why not just call? I gave Tyr my number, and you said he passed by your place."

"I planned on it earlier today where we would decide to visit you or not, it only takes about two hours for us to get out here and all. I would've called around ten or so for a possible visit just after lunch, but then Ganauche happened." The less said about this morning's disaster the better, in her opinion.

Fiorella had seemed more or less fine after breakfast with her own sons, Nilda, and Silvano... up until her 'favorite' of her husband's bodyguards joined them for the somewhat lengthy trip. Even after still agreeing that being without a bodyguard for this family connection mending escapade of hers was a poor idea, apparently the Lightning Guardian was entirely too much still.

A bright voice below insisting that it was fine, that a particularly chipper Sun nurse didn't mind hugging others at all, alerted the two of them that Fiorella was on her way up. Sonya finally shifted from her position firmly barring the way into her own rooms, with a very dismissive, "you're sleeping on the couch," tossed behind her.

...wait, what?

Chapter End Notes

Russian Roulette is being turned into a podfic! Done by QuinsValoria, and I finally figured out I had to post it to the Dragoness' Library series.
Waking up in almost pitch-darkness only lit by soft and diffused moonlight, Fiorella simply lay there and felt her burningly sore muscles.

She might've overdone things heavily chopping down a previously rather fetching tree from the feel of it. There were more than enough sore or burning muscle groups to make her instantly regret not getting more exercise in her life, and to be sure getting to the bathroom would be an ordeal.

It had been way too long since the last time she chopped firewood and chopping an actual freshly fallen tree trunk was a bit more than different from just collecting fallen dead branches to burn. The last time she had used a hand ax had been after she graduated from upper-secondary school, she and the rest of the classes from her school had a bonfire-campout to celebrate and say goodbye to each other…

Distracted by old memories or not, it was a little hard to miss one of her two bedfellows suddenly rolling over to give her another newly familiar hug. In the dark, it was almost enough to see the very faint glitter of that yellow Sun Flame as it seeped into her achingly abused muscles.

"Hi." Tatiana Primakova greeted her, quietly out of respect to those still sleeping but brightly enough to feel cheerful. "Feel better?"

"…I am horribly sorry." That was not the best introduction she could have to meet Sonya's older sister. She didn't believe anything she spoke of yesterday was remotely coherent, and she knew for a fact she didn't even give the lovely woman a greeting after being introduced to her.

A bit more personally and quietly embarrassing, now she was aware of it, being in bed with the Russian sisters allowed her to feel exactly how fit the both of them were compared to her. The Sun on her left was almost heavily muscled for a woman, built a touch stocky even when stacked next to a mother of three. The still sleeping woman on her right was sleeker and less defined, but no less soft in form than her older sister was.

Surprisingly, yet another reminder those around her tended to be utterly divorced from 'lawful' work didn't immediately trigger a rush of anger to somehow manage without lashing out at those that didn't deserve her scorn.

Very cautiously, she thought back to when Timoteo finally told her exactly what it was his 'family business' entailed. That nothing about it was respectable, that her sons were expected and would be the next leaders for criminal factions without so much as her agreement needed, that the man she married had thought and operated like she wouldn't have accepted him at all if he was remotely honest with her.

…ignoring how it would feel to realize you married and had several children with a complete stranger that had never trusted you a damn bit. That nearly five years of life had almost been a complete and utter lie, or at least built off one.

She felt weirdly muted and just overall tired now, still rather betrayed and angry but without the almost toxic and choking bitterness that she had been feeling for nearly a full month. Yes, she was still angry with her husband but it wasn't the only thing she was feeling anymore.
Embarrassment was a bit of a bad feeling, but it was different.

The busty redhead picked up her left hand, passing a thumb over the blisters she rightfully caused herself with the metal handle of the strange battle ax her younger sister allowed her to use. "Give me about five seconds to further reduce the strain you put yourself under, then if you need the bathroom or a drink of water go my way rather than Nya's. She gets... grumpy when others crawl over her."

"I am still very sorry." Fiorella attempted again, both happy and annoyed by her own inability to manage much else to say right now.

"You can feel sorry, I like hugs." Insisted the brashly chipper woman back, with a smirk she could only dimly see the more she adjusted to the dark of a rural comune rather than a big city's eternally lit nights. "Try moving now."

As Tatiana had even gotten to her aching back before she felt confident to try adding that to the list of complaints her body was feeling, Fiorella gave her a hug that wasn't emotionally needy or expressly to allow more access to heal by before gingerly trying to get up.

Somehow between the blur that was getting to soak in an almost scorching hot bath and being pressed with some of the older sister's clothing to sleep in, which might have included some kind of dinner within but she couldn't be sure, dear Nilda ended up sleeping on a couch shoved up under a window. That still left Ganauche and their Superbi driver unaccounted for but in a way, she was kind of pathetically grateful for that.

Timoteo's Lightning Guardian hadn't expressly been the straw that broke the camel's back, but she was aware the man probably took her very unfortunately timed breakdown that way. Ganauche saw a lot, and she suspected he very thoughtfully held his silence on a lot of it, but it didn't mean he wasn't sensitive to why some things happened around him.

He deserved an apology himself, and an explanation. Not doing either would ensure the Mafioso would always assume it had been his fault, and it really wasn't. Even if he was distinctly more murderous and lethal than she had assumed to be just knowing he was a bodyguard, and his arrival had been a rather unfortunately timed reminder at the wrong moment.

Before she even managed to put a foot down on the ground, both Nilda's and Sonya's heads popped up. Her Rain bodyguard woke up even more and looked almost like she wanted to say something but ended up shutting her mouth under a very clearly glowing lavender glare from the blonde aimed at her.

Tatiana snickered, utterly unafraid of that grumpy and very irritable little sister of hers as she rolled into Fiorella's abandoned spot to smother that day-glow gaze with yet another hug. "I'm with Nya, anything and everything can wait until at least dawn."

Sonya snorted, very pointedly wiggling out of her sister's hold, and equally as pointedly thumped her head back down on her pillow while ignoring her elder sister quietly laughing at her and everyone else.

It drew Nilda's attention firmly off her, and Fiorella just appreciated that little bit more privacy before she had to face the damage she had done.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 17th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
"Nya, why are you attending church?"

"Shamal's Catholic, and I want to be sure of which one he might prefer when he picks one himself." Sonya informed her, in an almost dead copy of her overly loud whisper as she joined her for 'post-mass brunch' followed by a Rain woman and a formerly civilian woman. "Why?"

"I don't know, kind of weird." She mused in a more normal tone, nibbling on what was for her a typical 'post-easy hospital shift' breakfast but kind of looked like a four-course meal to a civilian. Blinis with a generous helping of jam slathered on top, an entire empty bowl of what could've been porridge, an omelet stuffed with sausage and potatoes she was currently on, and a few stems of previously eaten fruit in their own bowl. "I mean, you once asked me if I had a religion. I kind of wondered if you got into it after that or something."

Tatiana had been more watching Fiorella take in exactly how much she had eaten compared to what she still intended to eat, with a growing smirk to show how much she didn't mind to keep the former civilian at ease with her obvious confusion.

"Sun Flame users have ridiculously over the top caloric intakes." Eventually relented the nurse, taking pity on the wife of a Sky who apparently never noticed the same in those around her before. "Especially in healing Suns, but basically all who use Dying Will Flames eat a lot more than what most think is 'healthy'. That energy has to come from somewhere, after all. Highest would be Suns and Storms, all the way down to Clouds who are stupidly conservative in energy levels compared to the rest of us."

Which was a tiny bit obvious, given what the other two Flame using females were picking out to eat compared to the portions the few other non-Flame users in the room had before them. The woman with the fabulous silver hair was going heavy on the potato, sausage, and egg scramble while her sister went in for a bowl of protein-heavy porridge studded with raisins herself. Both of which were likely choices made in respect to the expenditure of any Flames the previous day and wouldn't be the only things they ate at this meal to even out six-to-eight hours of nothing while asleep.

The fact she hadn't noticed a difference herself might mean Skies were more 'normal' than all, or that even that small of a detail had been hidden from her notice and could be astronomically or only slightly more than 'normal'.

"Just because I'm more efficient doesn't mean you need to be jealous." Shot back Sonya blandly, accepting her per-usual omelet and bacon with toast she had a taste for since who knew when from her green-haired cook.

It didn't exactly explain why Cherep ate more than his fellow part-Cloud, if by the caloric charts in St. Julian's claimed all Clouds were light eaters and it had proven true enough for everyone else that needed the same information. Then again, a near-eternal use of Cloud Flames to Propagate Cherep's own flesh and blood would mean a constant drain on their brother while Sonya had more than just Cloud Flames to support using.

It couldn't be a complete list for energy expenditure, obviously given the glaring lack of records on Sky eating habits and needs. Maybe it was just also less than complete on Cloud Flame users too.

Fiorella eventually settled into a seat across from the redhead, choosing a distinctly less filling item to start on from the available buffet of pre-made foods. Nibbling cautiously on a crumbled bit of a cake of syrniki, she then added a bit of sour cream to her plate to dip a forkful in as she adventurously explored a bit of Russian cuisine as one of the other women across the room at a different table was doing as well.
"You might be more efficient, but at least I still have my muscle tone." Tatiana continued the semi-familiar bickering, wondering if she should add a bit of the protein heavy but lightly fried cheese cakes to her meal or if she would be safe enough with just all this.

It was never easy to judge things right, so many stupid little factors made it entirely too easy for her to overeat. Not eating right for an Activation-heavy workload was half the damn reason she got so skinny just before Valera was born and given how badly she alarmed both of her siblings, overeating was easier to swallow than under eating and losing an 'emergency' store of energy for bad days at the hospital.

The stress hadn't helped a damn bit, and she only learned the caloric thing well after the fact.

Well, live and learn and all that.

"Miss Primakova, if I can-

"You can call me Tatiana, or even Tats." Seriously, she sobbed into her chest for a full five minutes then fell asleep in her arms. They had to be on first-name basis by now.

Rain lady of watchfulness not so much, but apparently still a known individual to her baby sister enough to allow her nearby while sleeping.

Lady Vongola flushed slightly, fiddling more than eating her third small cake of cottage cheese held together with egg. "Um… yes, aside the whole inviting myself over debacle."

"Not to interrupt you again, but…" Holding up a hand to give the illusion of privacy, she shot the poor woman an amused smirk behind it. "...it's a common thing where we come from. Nya will note it's not culturally accepted around here and expect the 'usual' call ahead thing, especially just so she's not gone when you get here, Russians really don't care all that much if you drop on by for a meal or so just to say hi."

The brunette gave her a small, tremulous smile in return. "May I now get out my apology for my self-centered emotional tantrum instead of actually managing a greeting beforehand?"

"Nope." Denied the nurse cheerfully, getting back involved with the job of supporting her metabolism as well. "Seriously, your mental and emotional health is as important as your physical. If you needed Nya to get the space to, then get it out and pick up the pieces to move on with."

Fiorella gave it barely a moment of thought, that timid little expression turning into something wry and a lot more human to the obvious pleasure of Nilda Superbi. "Can I at least ask to restart our acquaintance?"

"I don't know… I mean, I really like hugs."

"Please?"

"Fine." With an outrageous pout to earn herself a small laugh, Tatiana turned expectantly to Sonya. "Nya?"

The thief finished nibbling apart the last half of her current piece of bacon, before getting around to doing as asked in a very bland tone of voice. "Fiorella Vongola, this is my older sister Tatiana Primakova. Nurse, general Sun Flame user, and giver of 'damn good' hugs. Tats, Lady Vongola. She of the fabulous shoes."

The civilian lady put her face in her hand, trying to hide the growing smirk as if the tremor in her
shoulders didn't give away her somewhat sheepish laughter.

"You know, if you're feeling contrary still we could always have a bit of Fut Gar practice." Glancing back to her sister's unexpected overnight guests, she still cracked her own grin. "But those are fabulous shoes you sent me, Lady Vongola. Thank you."

"...you're welcome, I guess. It's nice to formally meet you, Tatiana."

"That is Mrs. Silvery-White, one of Ottavia Vongola's hatchet women and agents. Now currently Fiorella's bodyguard and general spy."

"Former agent for Ottavia. And must you?" Asked the Rain lady with shallow exasperation, more amused than irked even for being outed as a 'spy' in front of several people. "Nilda Superbi, Miss Primakova."

"Nice to meet you too." Sort of, although admittedly the civilian or formerly-civilian woman was still kind of more interesting to her.

Fiorella looked up from her hands in time to accept a pitcher of coffee for her and her Italian friend/bodyguard/spy from the hands of the assassin cook, who seemed mildly curious over the new ladies but tactfully letting the women sort things out themselves. Cesare looked instead at his boss with a politely professional smile. "Lovely bossy Dragoness, the men your guests brought were redirected to the local inn. Would you like me to call them back up here?"

"One second, Cesare." Looking back at said guests, who both glanced down at the borrowed clothing that Fiorella actually fitted and Nilda was a touch tall to do with Sonya's sizes, the younger thief waited until they both were paying attention again. "Fiorella, did you have a reason to visit or did you just need a change of venue for a moment?"

The woman in question gave her little sister a wry smile over a coffee cup, then started ticking things off a hand. "Welcome to Italia as a resident, Sonya. Have a bottle of wine! It's one of my favorite vintages, done by a charming vineyard near home I wanted to know if you would like to tour with me sometime later this summer. I was also wondering if I could ring you up sometime soon, for an in-depth conversation about a few stranger things I would appreciate a second opinion on? Furthermore, as I only recently became aware of the undertone of my lifestyle that seems everyone is involved with, is there a different job description you prefer than just Soviet Flame expert or just a 'Principal' title?"

"I retired from being a principal, but I'm a professional thief by that trade." Allowed her baby sister with obvious amusement. "Usually for jewels and antiques, and occasionally books. Otherwise for whatever someone would like to pay me outrageous rates to steal."

"Black market nurse." Tatiana volunteered for herself, because it seemed the lady just really appreciated the frank way Sonya detailed what she was for her. "Most of the way to being a black-market surgeon. Former safecracker."

The Mafioso hanging around their table raised a finger. "The wine is already in the wine cooler, lovely bossy Dragoness. The fine fellow with one eye ensured it was stored away after your equally as lovely sister stopped teasing the poor man."

"I'd rather have in-depth conversations about mafia and mafia etiquette in person than over the phone, but I would not mind if you would like to call in the next week or so." Continued the more ash-grey blonde at their table after a nod to him to acknowledge his point. "The wine-tasting sounds fun, but as most of the summer is reserved for my brat and I have to go back to work almost
"immediately after… perhaps a raincheck for next year or something once I'm back from my 'usual' work in winter?"

"Lovely." She decided with a shrug and a pause to sip her drink, before setting it down firmly. "Then it was a delightful visit, Sonya. You have a very charming home, I adore the library-esque in feel and look you are going for. We should get out of your way before we take up your entire evening. Thank you for having us over, for what should've been a short few hours…"

"Thanks for the firewood." Sonya shot back equally as sarcastically, earning a self-conscious laugh from her. "Behind you, the green-haired lady in the kitchen? Her name's Ruslana Tolmacyova, non-Flame using mother to a young Rain boy. Down the hall a bit, brunette woman sitting with another boy? Zinaida Samuila, equally normal mother to a child with Mist Flames. If you want to talk with them about the trials of raising Flame active children or just to complain with, don't think they'll mind too much."

Fiorella pinned her with an attempt at a playfully haughty look, which really would've worked better had the woman not been embarrassed still from cuddling with them all night. "I… would love such opportunities, thank you. But I need to go rescue Silvano from my sons, he's a wonderfully warm man but a touch more than permissive when it comes to their less than polite antics."

"By all means, go rescue Mr. Silvery-White. After breakfast."

Nilda palmed her face with the hand not cradling her coffee, which didn't cover the smirk on her face.

"After breakfast." Agreed Fiorella wryly, before looking up at the chef. "Would you please call our driver and Ganauche back up here? Not immediately, but just once they have things reassembled?"

Tatiana glanced over to her baby sister as Cesare insisted he’d be delighted to, and it seemed her prickly little sister was not entirely against the Italian interlude of managing emotional angst nor losing half a day to helping the other woman manage it in a healthier way than repression.

Then to the platinum blonde on said thief's left, who seemed to have run herself ragged trying to get the newly and painfully poorly inducted prior civilian wife of a fairly powerful Sky to settle on her own to the point of apparently missing a few things in front of her nose.

Which was actually an issue a lot of Flame users had, being Inverted when someone with a Classical nature was needed generally worked out poorly in those situations. Inverted Suns did not make great nurses, equally so Inverted Rains weren't the best negotiators you could throw into a situation… but it still happened.

Lastly she took in the poor woman in question, who had now something stable if awkward to build herself back up from with a promise of a future conversation and some major brute-force therapy with a battle ax. Who did all that upsetting of a seemingly fairly experienced Inverted Rain to the point of distraction, managed to slide herself into the allowances of a prickly Storm-Cloud, and frankly accepting of a Sun user's hug so innocently without suspecting healing-reasons or Activation manipulation.

Well… it had been interesting at least. Kind of eye-opening to the local power structure and how it treated those with 'lesser' power, or none at all, which really just reinforced her current worry about mislead Lightnings and how they were treated.

Some shit was seriously going wrong in this country.
She and Ganauche needed a fairly in-depth conversation soon, sooner than she had expected, but that wouldn't be nice to have in Sonya's home while she was trying to adjust to it.

…and she still needed the man for the whole 'fend off Nicolai's assumptions' thing. There was no way this was going to end well.

The choice was between her own short-term comfort without resorting to the 'family' card and never hearing the end of it or being honest enough to maybe have an actual relationship with the guy after the dust settled.

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(Monday the 18th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Sonya showed her sister into the Mirror Lady's claimed bedroom on the third floor of her castle, very firmly tugging her into the room before shutting the door pointedly. "This, Tats, is why I didn't bother to buy any yarn."

"...oh my fucking god." Equally as disturbed as she was fascinated, Tatiana stared blankly at the massive pet Flame-spider sitting in the shade between the two forward-facing windows in this room.

Pavuchky probably stared back, but with eight eyes that didn't blink all facing everywhere it was a bit more difficult to tell where Anna's darling pet was looking. It also didn't move, because the spider probably didn't give a damn what was wandering into his reach as long as there were no sudden movements.

The Mirror Lady herself popped out of the full-length mirror propped up in one corner of her room, ducking some of the spider's oversized web covering on her way. "I've got about... sixteen kilometers of string, Boss Lady. All undyed. This is all from the last year, bolts of fabric will take a small bit longer."

Ignoring the title, Anna was now never going to stop calling her that for asking if she'd stop in the first place, the thief instead considered the offering she held looped around her arms and trailed back into the mirrored surface it was brought out of.

The string wasn't... quite the size she hoped for. The length was fine, she might be able to get several sheets of Flame-resistant cloth out of it. The diameter of the spider-silk string was less than ideal, seemingly being barely a millimeter if not smaller. The thinner it was the more likely it wouldn't perform as she wanted when used like yarn, right now it was just like strands of undyed silk thread.

"Would he mind weaving it into a yarn or cloth himself, or should we invest in a loom?" It was too small for her to try out her beginner skills with knitting, unfortunately. "Would he coat a length of yarn with silk, and would that be Flame-resistant?"

There was probably something a professional could do with it, but she was very damn far from 'professional' anything that didn't included stealing the belongings of others.

"We'd have to try an experiment with the yarn to see if that would work at all, but a loom might be fun." Anna replied after a moment of thought, and a speculative glance to her pet. "However, this is already almost a hundred strands spun together already. Getting it thicker for yarn might not be practical just yet. Or we'd have thick and very short strands."
…Sonya kind of wondered who would be using said loom, her, the Mist girl, or the spider. Besides which, if that mass in her arms was all one length then ‘shorter and thicker’ would not be a problem in the least.

She considered the absolutely unmanageable armful of milky-pale spider silk string being presented to her, half-suspicious the only reason the entire amount was being held at all was due to Mist Flames.

Really, the most important thing she could think of for Flame-resistant cloth was actually underwear rather than just sheets or towels. If only because she had burned off all her own clothing once, and that had been really fucking uncomfortable and cold walk to find more. If the spider-silk was equally as resistant and strong as that square patch she once experimented with…

"I think Peter was asking for something with tensile strength and might be resistant to Flame he could use in one of his projects some time ago, Anna. We had nothing to give him, so he might be interested in seeing the raw string you've got from Pavuchky." Aside that just weaving it into a cloth was likely the only use for all the silk the spider had produced, and the Mist had saved up. "I'll get at least a small loom set up down a level, but could you wind at least a good portion of that on some length of wood for easier use?"

The best course of action might actually be getting Shamal's permission and starting up either a sheep-farm or silkworm farm in his name, then either modify or reproduce the Flame-induced pregnancies in a few control animals in hopes the result of Flame-resistant fibers reoccurred.

It was a lot of spider silk string all together but given a blanket's worth of yarn was up around the range of a kilometer and a half of knots reduced to a three by maybe four-five feet of material… this was both thinner and would require more of it to match the same size sheet of the end-product material.

What they had so far was probably only five or six bolts of fabric from one massively oversized spider for one year. The size of the strands also meant the weave would likely be finer than just a bolt of cotton cloth, probably along the same fine feel of cashmere if not silk. They also didn't know how long the Mirror Lady's pet would live, if this all was a third of his life's work or if Flames being fed to him would lengthen the spider's life to net them a few more sheets.

What else was yarn and cloth made out of?

Flax and cotton.

…cotton was actually a more ideal substance to start in with, on second thought. Easy to grow in a civilian run farm, any color deviations could be explained away with 'experimental' strains of the plant. No possibility of a strange diet which might result in unintentionally encouraged cannibalism…

Although… how much Will did a plant have?

Could plant fibers end up with a resistance to Dying Will Flames?

Perhaps, once the brat was up here and able to decide the future for his discovery, Verde could be tasked with figuring that out with clinical trials.

Sheep might produce more wool than silkworms could produce silk, but cannibalistic sheep would be harder to hide if something came up to civilian attention. Before they decided on either, someone or Verde had to find something else for the animals or insects to eat without forcing them to attack
either each other or more normal variants of their species in search for the Flames to supplement their existence or diet.

"Nya... that's a damn big spider." Tatiana belatedly announced bluntly as if no one else could understand that detail but her.

Sonya glanced upwards and over, because Pavuchky was the size of a human head discounting all eight legs and that was really kind of disturbing in a way. "Flame-resistant cloth, Tats."

"...oh my god." Running a hand through her loose hair, the nurse shot her and then the Mirror Lady both looks of despair. "Who the hell left you two unsupervised?"

"This wasn't my idea, the Mirror Lady just got attached to the result of the experiment. And it wasn't hers either."

She shoved a finger into Anna's face. "I am not treating spider-bites from your pet."

The Mist girl sniffed in offense back, hugging the mass of pearly-white strands to her chest. "We do not require your expertise anyways."

"So long as that's clear. Can he do bandages?" Inquired her older sister, eyeing the silk contemplatively. "How well would those work as sutures? Does the silk dissolve naturally when exposed to human physiology, or would it be like stitching someone up with really thin fishing line?"

Pavuchky's 'owner' shrugged dismissively. "I don't know."

From the tone alone, the teenaged girl also didn't care.

Tatiana shifted almost a quarter of the way around to face Sonya instead, apparently deeming the Mist as probably not the one to talk to about this new discovery. "There's a... unfortunate propensity for Flame users to burn out sutures and stitches at bad times. How much will you charge the hospital to test that out as a possible solution?"

Sonya thought about it. "...is that 'propensity' just to... gain the attention of a Sun to solve their 'stupidity' and get out of the hospital quickly, or just accidental shit that happens before they remember they're injured?"

"More the former than the latter, but if you say yes it'd only be used for the latter." Admitted the professional nurse wryly, contemplating something else in her mind for a moment before refocusing back in on her. "So?"

"With as thick as the silk is in Anna's arms is, I actually kind of doubt it will dissolve within a month even with the immune system attacking it." She pointed out, unsure of the composition of spider silk aside 'something it ate' which probably meant 'masticated bug juice'.

...or had meant, until Pavuchky got big enough to go for small birds and rodents instead.

She'd have to bribe Anna to be sure Shamal's puppies didn't get eaten by the arachnid.

Her sister hummed, tilting her head to the side. "That's not entirely a bad feature, some sutures need to remain for a while after the injury superficially heals over. Especially skin or muscle anchored stitches, which we already use nylon thread for. They get removed through the skin anyways."

"How about you ask Pavuchky?"
The Sun user blinked at her, then glanced to the spider in question. "How do I do that?"

"Give him some Sun Flames."

Tatiana shot her a skeptical look, then a searching look to the politely blank features of the teenager, and back again. "Like... on a finger?"

Sonya shrugged, extending a hand with two small wicks of ruby red and lilac purple Flames to the spider now delicately picking his way across his 'home' web. Watching the production of Anna's pet first poking then tasting the Flames before eating it, and especially warily eyeing the arachnid that suddenly grew an inch bigger in the blink of an eye, the older woman looked entirely unsold on the suggestion.

"Why?"

"He might give you some silk to experiment with, he gave me a bit for giving him a bit of Cloud Flames."

"How much is healthy for him?" Questioned the redhead next, which finally earned her Anna's forgiveness for the previous refusal of responsibility to her possible mishandling of her pet.

Pavuchky decided to grace the nurse with a spool of silk of her own, winding a decent length on his back legs for a few grotesquely fascinating minutes until he had a couple meters and handing it over with a foreleg. With a very strange expression on her face, Tatiana gingerly accepted the fresh-made offering the spider held out to her.

"Thanks, little guy." She glanced down to the off-white loops of pearly silver in her hand, to her sister, then to the watching Mist. "...he's intelligent."

"How big is a spider's brain?" Sonya wondered next after accepting that apparent truth, trying to figure out how much of the arachnid's growth would translated to more brain capacity.

"A spider's brain can be anywhere from fifty to eighty percent of their cephalothorax, the first segment of their bodies where the eyes and mandibles are, and when they are young their brain can even extend into their legs for a time." Anna helpfully volunteered with a proud smile for her pet. "He is easily now the smartest spider in existence."

That didn't necessarily mean much, nor did it detail how and what the spider thought. If it had thoughts outside of prey-hunting/web spinning calculations, or even if it thought in a method a human could understand. Or if he didn't care, and just wanted the noisy creatures out of his lair already.

Was that emotional intelligence?

Did Pavuchky have emotions or enough intelligence to understand them?

Rubbing at the sudden ache in her temple, the Storm-Cloud tried and failed horrifically to stop wondering. "Does he get enough to eat, Anna? Should I make up some Propagated insects to help you feed him?"

"He shrinks slowly after you feed him as the Cloud Flames wear off, Boss Lady. I don't think he gets very much from your Flames, aside the red Storm he tends to eat anyways even if I don't see what he uses it for. His size right now is a nice balance, mostly feeding him off my own Flames and a bit of donations here or there from Flame-active wandering through here unannounced." Explained the Mirror Lady frankly, shifting the strings in her arms to start winding around a small dowel of
"I think if I fed him any more he would reach a size I can't entirely support myself, so if more silk is an immediate concern only you would be able to coax more out of him."

"What you have is enough for what I want to test, Shamal and you will have to collaborate for further needs if we have them." Besides which, if the spider was intelligent then demanding more than it would produce naturally for the food and shelter he was granted as the Mist's 'partner' would be rude. Even if it wasn't, there wasn't a point in forcing more until an actual use for all of it was figured out… and that could be considered animal cruelty.

This whole farce suddenly held more moral pitfalls than Sonya really felt like navigating all of a sudden.

"Well then, does he understand thanks, or should we just go find him insects to say it instead?"
Inquired her sister slowly.

"Yes." Admitted the teenager with a beaming smile for the sisters.

…that really didn't answer much.

(Wednesday the 20th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

As Tatiana was still 'out' with Ganauche somewhere, the date had so far lasted the entire afternoon of Tuesday and didn't seem like it would end before lunch today, Sonya finally went to go see her library.

Such as it was and mainly to give Hawk something else to do before it occurred to the Storm to burn it all, so he would never have to deal with it again.

Having been through all the books that made it up herself not too long ago, she knew perfectly well it was… a strange collection. Buying tomes on whims depending on access and interest meant that while the history section was overly detailed enough to have specific texts about various counties or disciplines in several time periods… the scientific periodicals was pretty much dominated only by geology texts or a few treatises by Nikola Tesla that weren't even here. There was only one true mathematical textbook, and she stole that from her own brother, otherwise that section was all manuals for various pieces of equipment she did or didn't own.

Most of it was fiction. A lot of fiction.

History was a recent fascination compared to the rest of her collection. One she probably would never really get on top of give how much there was and might not be recorded where she could find it.

In a world without the internet, libraries were pretty much the only place to learn new facts or basic skills without shelling out a massive amount of cash for specified lessons from professors of whatever discipline or some decently experienced guide. Having a personal library and not needing to visit a municipally owned building set aside for public use was actually a pretty damn good sign of higher than middle class living.

Normally, however, that was a small study-sized library. Perhaps a living room stuffed with
bookcases more often than not. Not a specifically dedicated room that spanned two large bedrooms and a decently spacious hallway down a floor.

With twenty-four bookcases, stacked back-to-back in four rows of three cases in the middle of the library, her collection of reference material only filled maybe five. In contrast there were eighteen bookcases placed against the walls in-between windows or a fireplace… and those shelves were filled to the point there was six additional bookcases on the ground floor already crammed with yet more.

…and they were still waiting more bookcases to fit the last few stacks of fiction books she had without a place yet.

They were handsome pieces, in truth. Dark stained oak, the wood at least an inch thick at the narrowest and built to withstand heavy loads without additional supports. Whoever sent them, and she suspected it was a specific hitman and not her Lackey ordering her shelves, had some fantastic taste in furniture for a room with a light-tan painted walls and red brick tiled floors.

It didn't quite match the wood of the fireplace mantel, or the crown molding next to the ceiling and floors. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, if they got lighter colored couches with equally dark wood then it would look pretty damn good. Tan or not, she was actually thinking of several different colors instead of all the same for the upholstery. It'd have to go with the red-brown-tan coloration already without being too dark or too light, but that should be easy enough.

…which might actually mean it was a poor idea and would be entirely too eclectic for something 'classy' or 'tasteful'.

Sonya wondered if she cared if anyone else would think it would look clashing with multiple colors. "Hawk."

A shuffle, and a muffled cluck of something heavy being put down on wood, and the Storm in question poked his head around a support pillar that now capped off the rows of bookcases. "What?"

"Regret following my ass yet?"

"Of course not." He lied badly through his teeth, pressing up off the floor to rise to his full height and join her on the other side of the library. "There's… not a whole lot else I can think of to do other than this, or stare at a ceiling."

Given how frustrated he sounded, she kind of got the idea that his inability to recall anything more interesting to do was a bit of a problem. Yet he had kept on working on this, even if she was well aware how boring it was to sort and shelve books, and even after Verde and Peter got distracted by other concerns.

"There's an account stuffed with a couple hundred thousand euros expressly for purchasing books, think you can fill out the shelves with actual reference materials?" What he started in on might just be telling or might just be the contents of whatever bookstore he found first. Either way it happened, there'd be more books and she would never be against that kind of end-goal. "Basics to intermediate level reference texts, preferably. While you're at it, see what tickles your fancy or seems familiar to you."

There still was a need for a suitably hidden 'third' library, if they were going to count the ground-floor bookcases filled with works of fiction in several languages as a more casual one. Otherwise the arguably more valuable if stolen texts would never be stored here to allow a full accounting.
Yellow eyes flicked to the side, which was one of three empty cases in the isle he was physically standing within. The man himself hummed for a moment, probably working through all the obvious or not reasons she could have to offer that particular task to him. "Sounds like something I can do, Miss Bazanova."

"Before you go further than the commune's limits, I'd prefer if you were armed. With whatever, but armed." She shook her head at his suddenly wary glance. "Not that I expect much, but just to safeguard against general stupidity it might be a thing to go out at least able to beat off a mildly intent mugger or two somewhere civilian heavy."

Hawk remained silent for a moment, although he didn't look as if he was finished thinking over the offer so she refrained from starting in on checking over all her books from the trip and sorting. "Are you sure this is something I should do? There's no telling what would be familiar to me, or if I can pick out good books from those peppered with bad advice."

"No, although it won't matter. Verde's likely educated enough to overlook what you pick out and weed out the worst, or at least correct it with other and arguably better texts later on." Oddly, the news someone would be filtering things behind him had what was usually an argumentative and touchy type of Flame user less bothered than she expected.

…without knowing Hawk before he ended up as part of a Mist-puppeted zombie horde, there was no way to tell if that was a difference of his nature or just simply because the Storm didn't have enough of a base understanding to formulate an argument upon. Frankly, without express permission or any interest from a group of Storms, investigating that for what was the problem was probably equally as morally grey as experimenting on the Mirror Lady's pet.

Who might or might not really understand what was going on without Anna's Mist-based assistance.

All they did know of this man was he spoke French almost like a native, courtesy of Verde's understanding of his native language, and that he was a Storm. Just knowing the language well didn't mean he was natively French, he could've lived there for at least half his life to gain that fluency and his native language was something vastly different. Even which Polarization of Storm Flames he had was questionable until more of a personality formed up again, to be something else aside just a moderately stubborn hard worker.

"What do you want more than just 'other' subjects?" Questioned the Flame user she was thinking about curiously, apparently finally making inroads on planning out how to fill her request.

"A couple kids will be using this for their school work, not to mention we need a lot of geology or earth science texts to make sense of a probably short-term inquiry." Sonya thought back along who all still had to move down here, continuing listing things off as she figured out at least the short-term goals they had to get through. "Some law, more language primers, less history since I have that covered at least somewhat. Any glassblowing guides, maybe a shit ton more mathematical theory texts... basically anything I don't have already."

"That's everything except history and a few language dictionaries." Hawk pointed out needlessly, an amused smirk curling up one side of his mouth.

"More importantly, anything you find vaguely familiar." She insisted upon without actually bothering to give that the proper amount of annoyance. "I've got very little against funding whatever the fuck you end up wanting to do, so long as you provide a few work-hours along with everyone else. Until you know what that might be, maybe try to find something outside my very expansive book collection."
"That's… interesting."

How it was interesting was probably not something he was going to comment upon, no matter how long she stared him down.

It took a couple silent minutes, but he did shift the subject slightly instead of continuing his thought eventually. "I've a… question. You are a Cloud, right?"

…the fact there was probably nothing to the question than an assumed understanding of her type based on only the impression of memories kind of irritated her. "Yes."

"You're down 'here' from where you were because of a godchild." Continued Hawk curiously, seemingly with no intent aside listing details off in some search. "There's everyone from a former African cartel prisoner to a genius level Frenchman, your own 'kind' and a handful of locals being added… oh, and that Chinese pair that have yet to come down here…"

"Is there a point to this?"

"Why are you collecting people?" He asked, not with exasperation or curiosity but just enough wariness to provoke an answer.

Sonya stared at him hard, wondering if he had done that with purpose. "I'm not. About ninety percent of those people have picked to follow or tag after me on their own. Which, may I point out, you did as well?"

"You could just say no."

"I tried saying no."

Hawk scratched at the bare beginnings of a five 'o'clock shadow on his jawline. "Then what happened?"

"Verde. And you." She hitched a shoulder, then waved a hand to help dismiss the topic. "By the time Larion asked to come with I kind of gave up saying no. I could keep on saying no, but I'd rather be listened to if something occurs than be outright ignored because that's how everyone got in here."

He considered that, and her, before giving a shrug of his own. "Fair enough, I guess. Is… that it?"

Shifting her weight to one hip, the thief crossed her arms under her chest and studied his slightly bewildered expression. "One could say I left you at odd ends to ensure the first order I give you would be preferable to you than whatever else you aren't doing. Or that I left you to your own aims to simply see what you would do once you could make plans on what to do next. Stay or go once you were 'safe'. Either way, I could entirely be manipulating you into following orders I give by mere conditioning instead of because you want to follow them."

"…you could. Right now, it's not like I'd know much difference." He waggled a finger in her face, now actually moderately amused instead of wary. "But you said something."

"You don't have to be unaware of it to be indoctrinated." Sonya countered without much humor herself. "You just have to let it happen."

"The problem with the stance you're trying to fool me into thinking is that you could've just let that Mist take me anyways. Even if I didn't want to go." He refuted again, a wry-half smirk on his face. "Yet, instead, I'm here and fully in control of myself. See, I knew full well that Mist you were working with is out of my weight-class. I can burn off your 'Mirror Lady's' mental tinkering if I need to,
maybe not the Mist-kid because he might just be a bit more than I can chew, aside the Misty-kids and one lone Rain there's just you. You're also entirely out of my ability to fight, but... right now, you'd instead fuck up whomever was trying to screw me over if it came down to it."

"...I'm starting to really hate my propensity to attract moderately intelligent or better people." She groused more at her ceiling than at him, irked and giving in to just being annoyed for the rest of the day. "Why can't you be gullible? You fucking walked right into a cabal of Mists fucking with heads..."

Hawk puzzled over that for her, like the complete and utter jerk he was turning out to be. "Well, we're assuming that's not worse than whatever I might've been running from. There's the devil you know, and the one you don't. Might've been the one I knew of was just a bit much, so I went with something no one seemed to know."

Under her rather unimpressed glare, he just shrugged again and spread his hands wide.

"I'm alive. Will probably stay that way too, and if whatever it is catches up to me... well, there's you." Giving it a touch more thought apparently just because, the irritating Storm made a little pleased hum again. "I think I used to play poker. You've got a good poker face, bossy lady, but you have tells. Way too many."

"You better not be a compulsive gambler." Sonya snapped at him, starting to see some humor in the whole situation. "I can handle it if you win or draw more than you lose, but if you're a loser compulsive gambler I'm tossing your ass out. You can go live on the mountainside instead."

"I have no damn idea. Should be something to figure out." Suddenly turning from mostly amused to a hell of a lot more serious, Hawk offered another wry smirk for her. "I know all the little niggling details, there's been nothing else for me to do but think over them all while I shelved books. Which I'm aware you left me to muddle through it all myself."

"And so?"

"At the least, in return for a roof over my head and a few professionally made meals a day, I can put up with menial tasks. Especially," he added pointedly, giving her an equally pointed look, "if said menial tasks are given with the intent of helping me figure out who the hell I am."

Well... that was a bust. Sonya huffed at the man, turning to leave the library.

"One last question?"

"Fuck's sake. What?"

"Why haven't you gotten into the sorting of your books?"

"Because if I start in on this, nothing else will be done." She, and conversely Galina, had figured that out about at the same time. Leaving it up to Sonya to sort the books in the schoolhouse's library pretty much was synonymous with ensuring she had way too much to do for at least three or more days. "And while I want to... if this place is to be ready before my brat gets here I can't. Be assured, I will be going through it once everything's settled. And if something's damaged..."

"But some of it started damaged..."

Sonya shot him a smirk and a shrug as she left.

(ooo000000)
"...is that it?"

"Well, yes and no?" Tatiana's expression showed she was very aware that didn't help him much, and she shoved a hand through her loose hair in frustration. "There's... just a lot of coincidences and not a whole lot of hard facts. Proving that is also... we're going to wait for naturally occurring incidents instead of manufacturing them. I'm only currently drawing off personal information in respects to three other Lightnings, one Russian, one French, and the last is a street-rat runaway from Iceland. And a tiny bit you. Some of those details... you'll have to ask them for more if you want."

Ganauche tapped his heel against the rocks, looking down below at the half-done railway and station boring out a tunnel through her sister's properties that their little bluff overlooked. "I... don't know where the other Lightnings Timoteo had to pick from ended up."

"That doesn't mean anything either!" Huffed the busty Sun nurse, throwing both hands up in the air only to pull her hands down to bury her face in them. "And even still, there's the 'normal' human reaction of getting depressed when you lose out in a once-in-a-lifetime chance to account for. With a big enough sample size, one or two of them might actually be the types to take personal failures that hard to do something utterly over the top and drastic with."

Well, with that little side-detail it made things a bit less strange he never thought of the subject before. "So, now what?"

"Galina and I need to have a very long talk." A heavy sigh, and she tipped over slightly to lean on him instead of sitting upright on her own. "Aside that, which is more back-home kind of stuff, this is your playground. Pass it on, don't, tell one person but not another, you'd know better than I would what would help your fellows out more."

Did all Russian Lightnings know each other?

That wasn't really something he could... well.

Even if Vongola Guardians were 'technically' not part of any other Famiglia but Vongola's, Ganauche could probably go back to his childhood home and ask for any child-related raising tips from the Nardone Famiglia. If the nurse wouldn't mind posing as a very interested party just trying to hammer out the logistics before committing to something, he could maybe get even the not-widely-spoken of tips more verbally handed down instead of committed to paper.

Then, if there was anything to her suspicions aside a whole lot of details matching up in individuals originating from all four corners of the world with the same traits, he could probably take a leaf out of the Russian play book and get in contact with Mafia School's teachers or student base.

"You went through a lot of trouble to 'break it to me' gently." He pointed out after a moment, a bit confused by exactly how much trouble she had gone through. Just to be extra, completely sure he understood a lot of the base she was drawing from and that she wasn't accusing anyone of anything.

"You're still a person, even if you think too hastily for everyone else's wellbeing." Tatiana muttered sourly into his shoulder. "Why wouldn't I?"

"A whole lot of people don't." Ganauche pointed out fairly, glancing semi-suspiciously over to the castle off to the side where her sister lived. Although, to be fair to the sisters, most of the time he interacted with the blonde Russian was when she represented a legitimate threat to his Sky or
Timoteo's influences or now when she could be a very massive block on this… whatever it was.

Which, now removed from those situations and with the allowances of hindsight, his previous actions were hasty and ill-thought out. It didn't invalidate anything either he or she did, nor did knowing what he did now have affected anything he then would've wanted to do in the moment.

A lot of things could've been done differently, and an equal amount should've been handled just a bit better… but that didn't mean anything would change. One aberration did not an exemption make, and as long as Sonya Bazanova was simply a strange Storm-Cloud from Soviet Russia alone nothing should change.

Ganauche hadn't required a whole lot of one 'Verde's' upbringing, Galina's early adulthood flirtation with a possible Lightning-born implosion, or exactly how Bjǫrn earned himself the title of Lackey to understand what points Tatiana was trying to make about Lightning Flame users in the end. Having that detail she was working off of was rather reassuring, because professional Mafia nurse or not taking things on faith in their line of work was really fucking stupid.

It did let him know only one of the three others being used as examples were heavily into this lifestyle and the other two were not thinking correctly for criminals. Then again, that was probably exactly how that supposed Mist of Sinclair's was fucking with the Suns. Not enough information trading was going on to catch those kinds of blips, because they all weren't that trusting of each other in the end.

"In a way, I think that's exactly the issue with those like you. You understand the point or threat first, so Lightnings tend to react first. It gives the illusion you know what's going on, when really all it is that you just know where the damage is coming from and can get there before anyone else."

"…wait, what?"

He had to spend more than a moment rethinking down the path he wandered down to return to what topic she thought they were on. Before he could get there, Tatiana continued on answering his thoughtlessly asked question with a flick of her wrist for apparently everyone else involved.

"You start operating on half the facts, or just the pertinent ones, and after enough time not getting that underpinning detail even Lightnings start assuming they were entirely correct or not double-checking on their snap judgements because it ends up 'not important' to the following situation." Drawing herself upright, even if he really didn't want her to move, the nurse started picking herself up to go back to their rather abandoned picnic. "Lightnings are getting short changed as flighty when it's really everyone's fault, and no one seems to care all that damn much."

Glancing over a shoulder, where it seemed the Sun was working herself up into a fine snit on his if not every Lightning's behalf, the Lightning in particular they had discussed got up to follow her. "So, going to answer my other question?"

Tatiana shoved her hands into her pockets, rocking backwards on her heels before bouncing forward onto her toes. "What question was that?"

Before she could bend to clean up their lunch and stave off a conversation point she seemed weirdly shy of, Ganauche caught her around the waist so she had to look at him. "I know perfectly well Lightning-thought processes are a pain for non-Lightnings. Yet, that was very clearly laid out for a Lightning to follow and keep on track even through a couple hours' worth of information."

Expressly in a way to be sure she wasn't attributing blame anywhere, just that there was something identified once you looked at the broader picture than just snapshots in the moment. She had
probably taken *pains* upon *pains* to edit anything smacking of blame out of her whole presentation, all alone aside the structure help if he knew anything about her.

"…Verde has opinions on the proper order of things." The nurse very pointedly gave as a non-answer, shoving her nose in the air even as she happily took advantage of the embrace to get comfortable against him yet again. "I lived with him for a few months, you kind of have to pick a few things up."

"Yeah, but that doesn't quite answer why."

"There's the thing with Nicolai happening now and not in another few months, and I asked… well, I asked my mom for a bit of advice. She did the whole globe-trotting thief thing before Nya did, you know. She's also a hell of a lot better in the diplomatic respect." Puzzling over something, Tatiana eventually decided to brush off the 'full steam ahead' brashness her Flame type was known for and gave him a tiny hopeful smile. "And… I kind of want to see where this might go. If you'd like…?"

"…I'd like." Ganauche confirmed with a bit of a cheesy grin. "As long as you ensure if we get into a fight your baby sister won't rip out my ribcage and make a coat rack or something."

"Nya knows better. And I did the 'buffer' thing with her and Sinclair that one time, odds are you've got one good fight's worth of grace to burn through before she seriously starts thinking of violent ways to remove you." With a dismissive shrug, she gifted him with a wicked smirk. "And, well… a coat rack? Eww… she'd probably make spoons out of your ribs if she goes for them. Just for that added ick factor with her grisly dinnerware collection."

That was not a whole lot better of a mental image.
Sonya eyed her sister's back, rather unbothered while the redhead intently went through her entire wardrobe for aims of her own. "I thought you had more to cover with Ganauche?"

"That was just part one." Tatiana insisted without giving her the courtesy of pulling her head out of the tiny mirror-room, which was probably going to end up a closet regardless of what it should've been used for given it was the only mirror in the set of rooms the sisters were sharing. "I got Ganauche to accept that Lightnings in general are mistreated without actual intent to do it, which is probably only just the tip of the iceberg around here. So, it's... I kind of have to wait until he reaches the next conclusion on his own. That there's no way I'm the first one to realize this kind of thing, and it's probably been going on with full awareness for a while in some places..."

"You realize, being a Lightning, it's either never going to happen or he's going to get there entirely too quickly." Pointed out the younger sister idly, burying her nose back into her paperback novella.

"I'm aware."

Humming absently, because the other woman was certainly old enough to handle her own relationship issues herself and it was really just absent chatter that occurred her to speak about, she attempted to lose herself in a plot full of Tuscan vineyards and a rather generic murder-mystery attempt.

It wasn't a bad attempt but pulling in another character at the last second to be the killer in the end kind of ruined what little enjoyment could be had in puzzling it out yourself instead.

With her mind wandering as the book tried and failed to hold her waning attention span, it finally occurred to her that Renato might actually not be attending Shamal's whatever, second grade or form, graduation at the end of the month.

The fact he had to immediately duck right back through 'her' territory after dropping Cesare off?

Sonya scowled at the lines of neatly printed text in front of her, as if they had something to contribute to her current line of irritating thoughts.

The hitman was fastidious about appearances, from reputation-based to even just his own personal one. Considering that at the point they had met the then-teenager had been wearing silk dress shirts and erased the freshly given bruise being slugged full in the face would cause anyone before confronting even an eleven-year-old girl like her, he was always looking out for what kind of impression he gave others and controlling the variables that might so much suggest something about himself aside what he chose to show. Mainly to hide the details from her and others, but he had been getting a tiny bit sloppy on that end these days.

At least around her. She wasn't sure if that was intentional or not, and the inability to do much if it was honestly-based instead of faked made her itch a little.

He also wouldn't get on the ground with her and Shamal, there was that whole if rather silent OCD-freak out after being smuggled in a shoddily carved out backseat of a clunker of a car, and the man was always in a two-piece suit and tie these days.
Not that… it was bad Renato wore suits. He wore them really well compared to some others she might not be able to name at this late date. She'd greatly prefer him in a suit than another of those luridly eye-watering swimming shorts.

...peacock. Of course the one time she saw him out of those stupid suits was in that brightly colored monstrosity, so now she had a preference for his dress.

Weird.

The point of this mental wander was that she probably should call Shamal's school and get the details instead of just wait for the hitman to collect her for it. Although, she wasn't sure if she knew the school's name.

Alright… instead, she should probably take advantage of knowing where Lady Vongola was residing these days and call her first. Fiorella probably knew if she had known how long it took a bus to transfer the less orphaned Flame children the Iron Fort housed to and from the place, even if she was vaguely sure the bulk of those Flame orphans were mainly homeschooled for various and obvious reasons.

Then call the school. If the ex-civilian wasn't entirely sure of the date herself.

Urg, she had to be social… or wait for the woman to call her. Either or.

Dropping the so-far ignored little novel, it wasn't the book's fault its writer was a little less polished than she had wanted and just for refining fluency's sake as it was perfect the way it was, she rolled off her bed.

Mostly just to see what about the closet-mirror-thing was so fascinating to her sister to the point the nurse took a seat inside of it.

"...Tats, what are you doing?"

The older Russian wiggled her toes in the overly broken-in old battered pair of boots the younger inherited from the deceased Crina, and the gypsy woman had bigger feet than Sonya so Tatiana probably only felt a slight pinch if anything at all.

Tossing her fire-bright hair over her shoulder, the nurse peered over and up at her curiously. 

"Seriously, where do you get these?"

Swallowing her first impulsive and admittedly rude as hell demand to know what her sister was thinking, she simply sighed slightly. "If I tell you, will you not wear those?"

Sensing something, in some magical empathetic way of either nurses or big sisters everywhere, she slipped the somewhat ragged pair of boots off her feet. "You wore them to Woodstock, are they special?"

"...they were given to me." And they had no use aside being a pair of boots to wear in situations losing one's footwear was a high likelihood, what the hell was wrong with her head? "By someone who's dead now."

"Ah." Tactfully sliding the boots to a farther corner of the mirror-room, Tatiana gathered Sonya’s áo dài to her chest before getting up and checking the garments out against her chest. "Sorry. I thought you just kept them around for nasty work, not for sentimental reasons. But, if they are that important to you… why don't you get them bronzed?"
That was… not a particularly bad idea. The nasty jolt that happened when her big sister was curiously trying out her old shoes then could never happen again, and then there’d be an object to glare at when she got annoyed all over again at the old bat's death.

Fully aware the suggestion was her attempt at an apology and seeing no reason why not to take it, the younger thief slid into the tiny closet and fetched out the old boots. "Do you think there's a place around here for that?"

"Probably not. Stuff like that's more industrial-heavy in utility, getting something bronzed is more a service you'd find in a bigger city. I could be totally wrong, but then again this is a pretty small town." Considering the purple and red loose silk splayed over her generous chest, in more angles than was normally possible given the wall-to-wall mirrors plating the entire tiny room, the nurse pursed her lips. "This is… actually pretty awesome. I didn't do it justice when you told me and looking at the end-product now, I want one."

"I thought you told me the 'peasant' blouses were all the 'rage' now."

"There's this… fashion revolt going on." Admitted Tatiana rather cheerfully, swishing the loose sleeves around herself. "No one's really listening to the fashion industry right now, especially after that disaster of a skirt they tried to push."

Sonya folded her arms somewhat defensively over the boots, curious and unsure how a 'fashion' revolt was done at all. "What do you mean?"

"Well, after all those years of pushing shorter and shorter skirts, suddenly trying to go to knee-length made a lot of women… unhappy. That some are ugly ass skirts didn't help them much, not all of them admittedly but more than enough kind of makes a girl seem like an old-school spinster."

Hooking both the Vietnamese traditional dress and matching pants over an arm herself, the nurse helped herself to another pile of only half-unpacked stack of dresses to pick through. "So, some American women are picketing against the 'midi' pushers in New York and about everyone else is figuring out their own thing."

"…good for them?"

She shot her a grin over a shoulder, picking through the five cocktail dresses she had so far and catching on her original red one with the really short hem. "You were stupidly ahead of the fashion curve there, baby sis. I'm going to take a leaf out of your book, but otherwise dig out my old teenage fashions for this year. Why not? There were a couple pieces I really liked, and not just because Arseniy would very grudgingly get them for me for completing some task Lisa set for me."

"That is…"

"Hilarious. Can you imagine him picking out some of those frilly skirts I have?"

Sonya thought about it. "You realize he probably stuck one of the non-vory idiots with shopping for Lisa, then claimed the results only if it was what she wanted, right?"

"Oh yeah, obviously. But still…"

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 21st of May, 1970 continued. Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Galina knocked lightly on the doorframe, hopefully to not interrupt young Miss Sōng Mingxia as she
finished off her round of tests. "Lisa, your son and son have left for the day."

She earned herself a tiny lift of the head rather than a more direct verbal acknowledgement or a full nod, but as these placement/examination tests were supposed to be timed the older woman didn't look away from the stopwatch in her hand. She didn't take offense, their new principal was always very strict about placement tests being as close to accurate as they could manage to get it.

Now she could manage more, children and lessons both, with the school her daughter practically built just for her. Obviously, her younger daughter had little to no interest in scholastic efforts for younger children. The tedium of repetition to hammer lessons into young minds tended to bore the thief and make her impatient. Sonya was never going to remain as part of the staff for long, she greatly preferred dealing with those that at least knew their basics and didn't need the obvious pointed out for them.

Old man Yaozu glanced at her as she joined him near the teacher's desk, but also said nothing as the two of them waited on the young Rain girl to finish up.

Mingxia, instead of finish early and stop the testing herself, used every moment of the remaining twelve minutes to be doubly then triply sure the answers she had written down were what she wanted to go with. The observing Lightning, as even a half-assed teacher, rather appreciated that kind of dedication.

She could list entire classes she knew for a fact had kids that would've rushed through it then give up once 'done' without checking their work over.

When Lisa declared the allotted time over, with a sharp click of a stopwatch's timer button, the younger Chinese girl very firmly put her pencil down and left her work on the table instead of scribble even just a second more.

"Hopefully the both of you are packed," Galina observed tartly as she led the way out of the schoolhouse the last time for them both, "otherwise it's entirely likely your things will be 'lost' in the mail."

Right now, she wouldn't put it past anyone around here to marginally inconvenience Sonya in hopes Gedeon would pat them on the head once or twice. Way too many were fully aware there was a significantly sour relationship between the former head of the Flame offices and their new boss, and just as much was shifting around as the 'old guard' that worked under old man Zolotov came to a decision if his son was the kind of man they wanted to work for.

Which left these little pockets of influences or jobs open the opportunistic and hasty could snatch from their betters. It didn't always work out for the best, but occasionally there was one or two with decent ambitions and opportunity to make something of it.

Occasionally.

More often, it was just a bunch of ass-kissers being stupid. Which, when the new Pahkan knocked them down a peg for their inevitable stupidity, would just bolster Gedeon's control so of course he wouldn't put the effort in to stop his clan from doing said stupid shit.

Thankfully, Galina wasn't part of that anymore.

Smaller, more intimate, operations removed the need for stupid behavior to stand out from the ten or even a hundred others just like you attempting to impress the same person.

"Miss Galina?" Mingxia eventually spoke up before she could take the both of them to the car she
had to liberate for their use instead of pulling from the Zolotov clan's motor pool. "When will I know how I did?"

"Results are going to be posted to one of Sonya's mailboxes, and then she or her Lackey will send it on to the castle. In two to three weeks." Lisa would be submitting her exams early, with the exams from those graduating and those participating in exchange programs within the Soviet Union.

Technically, given her age, Mingxia should either be changing from primary to secondary education or just completing her first year of secondary. As the girl was 'homeschooled' in a rather unofficial method, they were attempting to fill out her blanks enough to join her age group in Europe instead of being held back a year.

They wouldn't learn if they succeeded with her until she did if the records were going to be sent out of the Soviet Union. The government was told the girl would be going back home, for 'family issues', just to enable her change from Soviet schools to Italian ones.

Sonya would have to smooth things over on that end, or maybe Galina would be given that task later on.

"Would you like us to get word to your brother when they arrive?" Before the girl could demur, and she would to the point any Soviet Rain would consider a touch too much, the Lightning gave her a very pointed look as she held open the back door to the small sedan she stole for her and the old man. "Your results are going to where he's at, it wouldn't take more than five minutes for someone to let him know."

Mingxia, sweet girl who was just a tiny bit too timid to inspire confidence in her plans to study and practice law, did at least think about it before refusing-

"Alright."

She paused at that vastly different reply than expected, but the girl accepted the offered conveyance and slid in far enough for her elderly caretaker to join her. With a shrug, she shut the door and slid herself into the driver's seat.

Galina had to deal with a large number of other children aside young Miss Song. It was entirely possible she simply felt more secure being dealt with one-on-one than just as one-of-many, and equally as likely to take advantage of her opportunities when she wasn't taking it away from another student.

Curious.

Were the other Rains doing the same self-sacrificing bullshit?

Lisa would have to assign Rains with semi-pushy opportunistic assholes just to get them their rightful opportunities to advance either themselves or their knowledge base, in that case. Were there enough young, selfish but smart enough, brats to pair with each of the Rains?

Making a silent tisk she pulled the car out into the day-traffic of Moscow, so the last three members of Sonya's household could join everyone else in Italy.

No wonder the thief was so annoyed when the basics were published on her. There was always something more to add, wasn't there?
"You've been gone for a while."

Viper wordlessly settled in next to him on the park bench, the ever-present cloak draped around the Mist seemingly made out of dark dyed cotton instead of medium weight or even heavy wool this time.

Skull kind of wished he thought to find a warm-weather variant to his stunt uniform, like before when he was going through the freaking desert, because black leather jumpsuits did not breathe. To make things worse, they all had to be suited up and impressive for this PR stunt thing to help generate in-country interest in the touring show for the rest of the States. So he couldn't just reach back and unzip the top half of this thing, even if he was probably on the edge of heat exhaustion already in the shade and doing nothing.

He had pulled his helmet off, his gloves were long-since abandoned on the bench's metal arm, and he had an entire bucket of ice chilling some number of sugar-syrup carbonated drinks he never actually tried before right next to his boots, but he still kind of didn't want to do anything.

As a stuntman, he kind of did his thing while in motion. He could totally do the whole talking with others part, he actually liked talking to other people, but getting into it himself right now would ruin some of Mauricio's fun boasting of just about everything to do with their lifestyle. It wasn't just amusing the hell out of him, the news reporters were hanging around him and the ice bucket just listening to the Spaniard wax on lyrically about everything too with little smirks themselves.

Well, Siegfried wanted the heat. Roy was just a little put out the stuntman thought to bring something chilled to this shindig and not anyone else, because that meant he'd get the greater amount of exposure to the national news people as they sought out something to take the edge of the day's heat off with between speaking to entertainer groupings.

All without saying a damn word himself.

The Esper right next to him started to snicker, obviously dipping into minds and removing even the effort speaking about anything would require in this climate. Skull reached down and pulled out another of what the locals called 'pops' from the watery ice water, handing his visitor a chilled glass bottle with an amused smirk himself.

Skull would eventually get off his ass, the whole point of the entire day was to promote himself as best he could. While the Rain was getting there as an orator, Master Liam had been very amused to find himself a protégé brought in by a former member of his circus and given some tips freely just for making him laugh, he was not the 'best' the former Czech runaway could do on his own behalf. He was... but he'd get there in his own damn time.

Like when it wasn't high noon, or when those clouds hanging around started to gather to give everyone a little respite from the summer heat.

Besides which, eventually even a Rain might have an issue keeping enough moisture in his mouth to keep talking with. It hadn't happened yet, and Skull was duly impressed with that, but Mauricio probably would like his own chance to take five himself.

"Your sister and I have completed our arrangement." Viper informed him, more than halfway through the strawberry-flavored soda he handed him, in what was supposed to be his 'native' French. "On both sides."
Appreciating the unasked for and unpaid for help in hammering home 'Skull's' native land more in the minds of anyone eavesdropping, he responded in the same language instead of pointedly in English for the locals' convenience. "So, how did you find the whole 'teaching' bit?"

"Annoying as expected, but surprisingly more lucrative than assumed." Shot back the other almost simply, eyeing the level of red liquid left in the bottle. "Even managed to annoy the hell out of her by the end, for specifically being smarter than the pawns I normally use... mou."

"Neat."

"I will be visiting less." Warned Viper in the next breath, before the Cloud could continue with his very pointed avoidance of his best friend's and his little sister's issue with getting along properly as they probably should as former associates and his sibling/friend. "The consequences were known of... and asked for. Sonya proved a deft hand at avoiding complications and wasted effort, more so than I had wanted."

Whelp, that was confusing.

Ignoring the raised eyebrow aimed in his direction, the Mist drained the drink and allowed the glass to drift from their hand to wander its own way to the nearest trash can. No one gave it any notice, even the man it very nearly hit upside the head and did splash with droplets of water.

"...sooo..." Drawled Skull, a bit confused as to why he had been informed of any of this. "Did you have fun...?"

He grinned in the face of the highly vexed expression aimed at him, attempting to bump shoulders with the other only to entirely miss making any contact whatsoever even with him right next to him on the bench.

"Seriously, all I'm interested in hearing." It was too hot to get into anything more.

"You really are the biggest dork I have ever met." Viper marveled, enough sarcasm lacing his tone to ensure the stuntman understood that was not meant as a compliment.

"I know, it's great isn't it?"

Snorting, the miser equally as annoyingly made a grabby motion with one hand.

Skull obligingly dug out the last strawberry flavored soda-pop and handed it over before digging out a Coke-a-Cola out for another reporter seeking a break under a nearby tree. "If you're busy, and not that I'm complaining mind you, but why did you visit me? I thought you left these events as either when you've dealt with too many idiots or if you needed a break from some problem or another."

"The fact you've noticed I have a habit or pattern to my visiting is half of it." Explained the Mist very pointedly, tipping the capped bottle in his direction to acknowledge the point he raised. "With what I am getting into, the habits I have acquired over the years need... dealing with. Before the others realized what I got away with and turn their attentions to trying to take it away from me. Mou, especially for the advantages I would like to keep."

Digging out another two bottles of soda from the now simply slushy-ice water tub, he very carefully lobbed the lemon-lime one at his Rain before settling back with another and shaking his hand to get most of the rapidly warming water off. "I'm not exactly predictable."

"Which is a help, indeed. However, you're not this year."
"Not this year." If he'd go back to the Großes Volksfest or not was entirely up in the air still, but there was also still the possibility that if his career really took off to go touring around by himself. Mostly.

If he didn't have Mauricio, chatty flamboyant Rain he was, then Skull would've had to go back to the circus after this. Even with the Rain added to his 'troupe' it wasn't guaranteed he still had to, another person wasn't that much more expensive in traveling funds if you could split a few costs. It was just simply because this whole world-tour was more about exposure than generating funds, he was getting a tidy paycheck because of the miser negotiating on his behalf but renting out venues to perform dangerous stunts with a gasoline powered machine was... expensive as hell.

More so than he had actually expected it to be.

Sonya asking if he could arrange things for a sudden stunt show had come at the best possible time, it hooked up with the offer from the Englishman bankrolling the small details on this tour in return for the bulk of the proceeds. Skull had done a bit of research himself and paid attention while things were being sorted out before they actually set up in each city, partially on his own and a bit second-hand from the Spaniard's drive to ensure everything was as sorted as could be for them before the stuntman took the stage and learned a few things that wasn't entirely obvious if you didn't know what was going on.

The shows where Skull didn't perform were actually cheaper for their 'patron'. Because of small tetchy details like 'possible ballistic machinery' and 'venue insurance' in case of the worse. Roy and Siegfried incurred just as much for showcasing trained big cats in their show, being lion tamers on top of their magician tricks dusted off for the occasional variation, but when they and he performed the same night it could get stupidly expensive depending on how new the stadium or venue was.

There were separate risks coming with the Wild West show which included the problems with using live ammunition, the risk inherent to trick shooting or fancy horseback riding, and a couple hundred-pound animals with iron-shooed hooves prancing around. Acrobats only risked their props or themselves depending on the routine, the comedians and clowns only risked themselves even at the worst point of their careers, magicians could be a bit riskier, and on.

The tradeoff was that neither Skull nor the Wild West show needed a permanent stage, not like the lion tamers, the stand-up comedian that did better in a club or more casual setting, or the space requirements a group of Chinese acrobats that left them in Canada had needed. He and the cowboys could also perform more shows in simple parks instead of the historic or expensive enclosed places that cost hundreds of thousands of whatever currencies to rent for a night. Such versatility did reduce risk in some ways, increased it in others with shoddy props and other difficulties, and those tiny details were a hell of a lot more important than he had figured them to be.

No, the undying Cloud didn't need health or life insurance. That didn't mean everyone else around him was as safe from unexpected and unfortunate death or would survive hale and whole after being hit with a ballistic motorcycle getting out of his hand. He'd feel horrible if someone got hit by a mistake of his, so insurance wasn't entirely something to skip out on as he had assumed only considering himself.

Now he knew about all the little price-tags that came along with his career, Skull was saving up to handle a few of them himself. The first show he did after this world-tour event would be entirely on his own merit, just simply to see what kind of pull he ended up with. Where he would hold that was a good question, but probably France because that was supposed to be his 'home' ground.

Not being entirely tapped out after the show, just in case he didn't get invited back somewhere or had any inspiration to start touring himself somewhere this outfit hadn't gone yet, would be nice.
…replacing Dianna the Indian Motorcycle so he didn't have to use Cleo the junkyard bike when and if she got totaled would be nice too.

"You realize you now own a massive property and can store things you may require later there, right?" Viper volunteered for him, which was suspicious as hell in the first place, nibbling on some vanilla ice cream he had come into possession of somehow in the last five minutes while the strawberry soda floated untouched next to them.

"That's Nya's." Skull pointed out in return, palming crimped metal to open his drink.

"It has a six-car garage."

…right, it was a castle and not just a tiny tower cottage or outright library building he had honestly expected her to get. Getting an actual look at the property he was holding onto the deed of might also be a thing to get around doing the moment he had a free moment or two.

Well, in that case, his little sister might not be against holding onto a few things for him. Like an extra backup stunt-bike, his circus-era tool collection, or other promotional things he was being offered for slapping a decal on his bike during a show.

"Be careful of what you sign for those kinds of things, Skull."

Ignoring the fact he wasn't speaking aloud for the Mist to follow his line of thought yet again, he finally got around to twisting the bottle cap off what was probably his last drink. "This is assuming she agrees."

"Do you really believe she will say no? What you ask for would be significantly less than what she requires, easily accommodated aside with what I know of the plans for that land is."

Taking a large gulp, or as large as he could get with a small opening of the bottle, Skull instantly regretted it as the drink was almost tooth-rotting sweeter than the last 'ginger ale' he tried. Mildly annoyed, he eyed the innocent '7-Up' in his hand suspiciously. "You're being really helpful…"

Viper sniffed in insult for the leading question. "Some of the advice you offered became… useful. Mou."

Ooh. "Enough to get you to pay for dinner-"

"Not that helpful."

Aww…

With a snicker, he had only ever manage to gross out the Mist once and it was still funny to him, Skull set the bottle down to get up and move on with the actual reason they were all sweltering in the sun out here. "Well, if no dinner is on the line… how about some ice cream?"

There was another sniff, this one a lot touchier than insulted, before the cone in his hand evaporated in dark indigo Flames nobody paid much attention to.

"No, I'm serious. I want some ice cream too."

His visitor considered it, then a bit more while he put his gloves on again, and finally heaved a pointedly aggravated sigh before he could go tap out his hype man to take a break. "Fine."

Of course, the Mist immediately drifted off rather contentedly for someone annoyed and irritated for
spending even that little amount of money on what could only be loosely termed as an informant. Which meant he'd might not get a face full of whatever it was he asked for, even if that would ruin whatever it was, for his 'payment' for good information.

Skull rolled his eyes before heading over to 'rescue' the reporters from his Rainy hype-man, wondering what he said that paid off so much the miser was actually buying him ice cream with only a token protest for appearances' sake.

It'd be nice to figure out, but the miser would probably try really hard to keep it from him so he wouldn't try to game the penny pincher to get 'rewarded' more often. He'd just have to deal with his curiosity, at least until the next time he somehow miraculously hit on something Viper felt deserved to be paid for.

(Saturday the 23rd of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Slamming a hand down on the annoyingly ringing phone, Sonya had to practically haul herself out of Tatiana's arms and her nest of blood red octopus-tentacle hair. Pressing the receiver she only just got bought and now probably should replace given the spider web cracks in the plastic to her ear, she narrowed her eyes on the dimly lit face of her bedside clock to see what the time actually was aside 'dark 'o'clock'. "Who the fuck is this?"

"Uh… hi?" Cherep responded, bemused and wary for the sudden hostility she was treating him with. "Can I ask a question, or should I…?"

"…where are you?"

"Washington DC?"

"Cherep, you're six hours behind us."

"Ah. Suddenly this makes more sense." Was the suddenly sheepish answer from the other end of the line. "So… it's just six in the evening now for me... and for some reason I expected you to be closer to the UK's time zones..."

"It's midnight for me."

"Yeah… my bad." Her fellow Cloud admitted apologetically, a shuffling noise which was likely his boots on something metal echoing in an enclosed space to the phone in his hand and on across an ocean to her. "Sorry."

"At least it's not calling at two or something." She should've expected this. Her brother didn't tend to mind time zone differences much when out and about. It was his favorite excuse for why he didn't call very often, because what was 'after work hours' for him might just end up being at awkward times for the rest of the family.

Like halfway through lunch, or the middle of the damn night.

"…that's still entirely possible." He informed her way too brightly, before toning it down a little out of respect to her late-night end of the call. "Should I call back tomorrow? Preferably in the morning?"
Pausing to yawn widely, and entirely grateful to modern air conditioning when the drowsy sister she was sleeping with rolled over to cuddle herself back to sleep against her spine, the thief hummed dismissively as she sort of sank back to the mattress. "Now is probably better, I've got stupid shit to do tomorrow."

He made a rather annoying if probably thoughtful sound with his mouth. "Don't you mean today?"

"I mean tomorrow, Sunday. It's now officially Saturday for me."

"Well in that case, then I meant later today for you and tomorrow for me."

"I still have stupid shit to do today too." With a snort, Sonya shoved a hand through her hair to get it out of her eyes and away from the phone. "Aren't you on a pay phone? Now is fine, it was just a little irritating to get suddenly after an early start yesterday."

"Oh?"

"Picking up Galina and the Chinese pair from the airport, it's a bit of a drive to the nearest one. Their flight got delayed a bit too." They could not finish the train line fast enough for her, that stupid tunnel going under her castle was only one lane wide.

There was no through traffic both ways, you could wait there for an hour waiting for the last car to go through before the traffic pattern was shifted to allow the other direction to dribble a few cars on in. The only other way out of her comune was the mountain roads, and none of those were very big either.

Also, mountain roads. Switchback and hairpin turns galore, and there was a reason they bored out her bluffs to put in that tiny car tunnel.

With a sniff, and double-checking Tatiana was drifting off again before shifting herself to more easily hold a conversation since she ended up on her stomach to answer the phone, she wondered how much damage she had just done to the three-day-old phone handle. "Anyways, what did you need?"

"Well, firstly I just wanted to know if you'd mind if I stored a few things in the castle-"

"Cherep, I have a six-car garage." Seriously, she only needed two. A general car for longer trips for the students or maybe if the parents wanted to take their kids somewhere, and a probably way too damn expensive one for 'impressing' bullshit she didn't see much use for but should get anyways.

"...creepy." Before she could ask what he meant by that, the stuntman continued on. "So... motorcycles don't take up much space-"

"And no one wanted the tower-room or want to be on the fifth floor. I'm getting an elevator installed, it'll only go to the forth, but that's apparently too far away or whatever for everyone else. You and whatever two guests can have those rooms. The view is pretty spectacular... if a little high."

There was some suspicious silence going on the other end of the line before her brother spoke up. "Actually, that sounds awesome. Thanks, Nya."

"The tower's already full of the junk Tats was storing for you." Continued the blonde with little amusement, confused to the sudden weight this entire conversation had and not certain about how to ask about it.

She should probably ask. She just didn't feel like it or feel like getting embarrassed because she didn't understand right away. He'd clear it up for her if it was important, or it could stay unsaid.
"Okay." Cherep responded without catching on to her confusion or ignoring it for tactful reasons himself. "I was going to turn down a few sponsorship offers because I can't actually use a lot of the stuff they were offering, and I'm only going to accept the small things in return for breaking off whatever when I want, so is there a size limit or just limits you'd want me to keep in mind?"

"...can I use any of that?"

"Totally."

"Well... furniture for rooms is fine, even if it is themed. I have a damn kitchen, with two stoves and two fridges, so avoid anything cooking-related." She didn't need to hear from Cesare exactly how bad it all was, if it was even remotely a touch less quality than the equipment he had either brought in or asked Afanasii to get him. "Unless it's something you'd specifically like for your stupid tower-room."

"Okay, anything else?"

"If it's a toy, you're only getting it if Shamal doesn't want it."

He barked a laugh, which was just a little too loud for her. She thoughtlessly twitched the receiver away from her ear, and a little plastic crunching noise equally as too close told her that she was definitely going to need a new phone. Tiny plastic fragments decided to litter her shoulder and some of her side of the bed, which was kind of very irritating.

"...Cherep, you made me break my phone."

"Pretty sure there's an offer for one in the mess of paperwork I got the last couple of days." Dryly returned her brother, completely unbothered. "How about a Mickey Mouse themed phone? Or one with a giant living piece of candy-?"

"Hell fuck no."

Trying to hang up on him ended up being the one last straw for the phone, it almost cleanly broke in half around her hand. Dropping the parts only hanging together through the merit of being a wired piece of technology, she instead ripped out the cord to the broken machine to cut off the noise of Cherep snickering at her expense.

To make things worse, Tatiana started snickering behind her too.

"There's plastic fragments in the bed." Sonya informed her with a decent amount of annoyance, brushing the ones she knew of off to be dealt with later.

"I heard."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 23rd of May, 1970 continued. Superbi Famiglia Headquarters, Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Tyr glanced down the hallway a slight distance to track the progression of chaos that came with traveling with young children, then turned back to Silvano Superbi. "I could return at another time."

"No, no. Nilda has things mostly in hand." The strawberry blond swordsman insisted, ignoring the fact that young Master Enrico Vongola was attempting to sneak away from the turmoil his mother was stirring up trying to order the Superbi maids to pack a day-bag for her two oldest sons. Which
would mean at least a fifteen-minute hunt for the child before things could truly be called 'in hand'. "We would be delighted to have you accompany us."

The man really shouldn't be, given it was highly likely he would annoy their hopeful hostess with the news he was bringing with him. The Sword Emperor had very specifically removed himself from any power-games Italian Skies were somewhat notorious for playing with just about everything that so much as twitched wrong near them, lacking the leverage to stop something he knew for a fact would not end well was his own specifically created fault.

As Tyr wasn't going to be the one to admit that, in hopes of not alarming the men the head of the Superbi Famiglia would bring to secure his responsibilities until getting them under the eye of a full-grown Cloud Flame users, Silvano eventually continued the conversation.

"Has Timoteo said anything about... well...?"

"He insists it must be her own idea to return, until then he has tasked the remainder of the CEDEF to secure the far north and the Varia to ensure no one south of you will bother her." A lucrative side-job to task the two-score handful of assassins he had collected the last decade or not, especially while he hunted the countryside for a location to home them all within and he could not spare the time to ensure their behavior would not alarm civilians, he was of two minds about those orders.

On the one hand Timoteo had deeply wronged his wife in a way that her restraint, in merely leaving him temporarily or otherwise, was admirable. On the other there were three high profile but young children involved, who were all probably on the top of any lists for kidnapping while so far out from the Iron Fort's bulwark.

A priceless opportunity for less moral opponents of his father, which could described most of their ranks as a matter of fact.

The head of the Varia Assassination Squads did not envy anyone involved, which annoyingly enough was about to include himself in with that number.

His fellow swordsman absorbed his words for a long moment, a strange expression on his surprisingly refined if somewhat arched features. "Hmm..."

"Thoughts?"

"That is... assuming she will do so." Silvano pointed out for him needlessly, right wrist twitching as if the man was tapping the rapier belted to his waist against the same-side thigh. Additionally, the man's tone was made to be somewhat soft and forcibly neutral which paradoxically drew more attention to his observation. "You, and they, cannot keep up such efforts indefinitely."

Tyr had little to say in response and opted to remain silent.

He did not mind a trial by fire for his newer agents, the number he will lose in the end could be replaced with some effort and the competence the rest would gain was a worthy trade off in his opinion. Enough time and energy invested, and he could easily replace five to seven assassins at short notice if need be. They would not be the quality of what he lost but they would equally as likely be more motivated to prove and improve themselves to the 'old hands' that survived this.

Decent spies, competent infiltrators, and reliable informants were harder to replace with modest efforts or within realistic time constraints. There was a level of trust involved simply strong-arm tactics or straight intimidation could not insure between two parties that had just met, as well as unverifiable levels of competence or reliability simply beating the agents in shape could not solve.
Better positioned to absorb the risks his current orders imposed on him or not, the head of the Superbi *Famiglia* was still correct for both his Varia's and the CEDEF's currently dismal near-future prospects. The Outside Advisory Branch had just recently split themselves to take on a position on the international stage, Tyr himself did not have a large number of agents to waste on near-impossible tasks either as he focused on quality over quantity for his branch of Vongola. Which then made recruiting more for both organizations in the eventuality of unsustainable losses a difficult prospect, humans did not particularly like joining groups that near totally guaranteed their death.

The time he had saved tasking a Mafia Land Lackey with estate-hunting for him had been eaten up in short order already, and the main reason he had given for joining this outing was to pick up the best-fitting results the Lightning-Storm had found for him.

…even if a little more personal investment on his part and he might then be able to safeguard the back of his Varia with an ill-tempered Storm-Cloud's home territory. With a few massive bee hives studding the area just to add insult to injury to any attempting to ambush his assassins at rest.

The problem was that he did not have that kind of capital, especially not with his assassins tasked with a job from their parent organization without the ability to charge wages in return for the man hours, and he would have to rely on Daniella to bankroll the remainder of the expenses if he invested in undeveloped real estate.

"*Federico Clemente Vongola, if you do not stop trying to sit on your brother I will see if Master Silvano will allow me to ground you to the estate.*" Leaving the handling of her fussy youngest to the other swordsman delighted to be given stewardship of the miserable toddler, Fiorella Vongola planted her hands on her hips and gave the master assassin a somewhat exhausted look he could not interpret. "*Master Tyr, can I be impertinent and ask a question of you?*

Tyr obligingly took possession of the Superbi Head's rapier for him while he had a young teething child to handle for the lady, giving said mother a half-bow once the weapons were out of young Master Massimo's reach. "*Of course, Lady Vongola.*"

Instead of the tight and irritated smile she gained the last time he witnessed someone call her by her title, the mother of three young boys merely nodded. "*What are you? Daniella would only say you head up a security branch, and Timoteo refrains from saying anything when I ask.*"

"*Lady Ottavia was not lying, I was and still am her head of domestic security if she finds something questionable enough to investigate.*" Catching the short 'Sonya did so' Nilda Superbi mouthed at him from behind her back when he straightened up, he then also nodded to the unsatisfied expression on Fiorella's face. "*By profession I am an assassin as well as a swordsman, and I do not find your justified suspicion impertinent at all.*"

Fiorella's mouth tightened, but surprisingly aside a nearly silent huff and sigh she did not react as he expected the woman to. Which was, admittedly, a demand he stay far away from her sons as physically possible. "*...I see. Thank you, Master Tyr.*"

She did immediately turn away, but more out of respect to young Master Enrico's third attempt to avoid inspection by the maids and get caught smuggling a small amphibian in his trousers' front pockets than from a distaste to socialize or interact with him. How no one caught it from the water stain spreading across the young child's pants was honestly something he was not able to begin to explain himself.

"*She barely flinched learning Miss Bazanova was a professional thief, and her elder sister a black-market nurse.*" Nilda murmured quietly to both men on her way past to keep tailing her charge, giving young Master Massimo a wry smirk and his latest teething ring to gum instead of her
husband's starched shirt cuff as well. "I'm officially a spy."

An… interesting interpretation for her role. Not incorrect but admittedly the least compromising admission she could make.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 23rd of May, 1970 continued. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Fiorella pointed up the bluffs, at the pale-orange castle poking out from the nearby mountainside. "We’ll be taking lunch up there, nonna."

Her mother peered in the direction, then gave her a very pointed look over the bonnet of the car the Superbi contingent arrived in to meet up with her and her father. "A restaurant?"

…well… "No, a friend of mine lives there. We are invited for lunch and dinner if we so wish, but mainly so we can accommodate the children without annoying other diners or spending too much money to eat out somewhere private before heading home."

She had more ulterior motives than the usual avoiding complication reasons for obtaining those invitations, but Sonya did invite them all up for the long-delayed 'chat' she needed to navigate the undertones of her life. The professional thief could entirely come off as a well-to-do bookish professor type easily, as she had when the Lady Vongola had been unaware of what kind of lifestyle most she knew of these days participated within.

Becoming aware of how isolated she had either allowed or unintentionally became was one thing, fixing it was another. Her parents were a good start, her older two were happy to have a pair of new nonni… but she had to ensure the reverse was true as well.

Her parents would then need to know individuals she was interacting with if she spent the effort to bring them back into her life as more permanent fixtures. Which then turned the very thing she was so irritated by, the non-obvious and sneaky ways others concealed their preferred illegal activities from those not 'in the know', into something she would then have to take advantage of.

Just so she wasn't obviously hiding something from her parents… when she was.

Master Tyr had already headed up there, sneakily but she was the mother of three boys. Eventually she noticed he wasn’t with their party or lurking with the rest of the ‘bodyguards’ and caught sight of him taking the stairs to a higher road that led into the driveway of the castle.

…which brought up a salient point she only just noticed, why did all of the Superbi men look so nervous?

"Fiorella, we're going to head up that way." Nilda informed her, her husband already expertly managing Massimo's attempts to continue gnawing on anything he could get his tiny hands on… including himself. The platinum blonde gave her parents a professional smile, which tilted crookedly after a moment when he mother appeared highly unimpressed at such. "Have fun on the beach."

"Alright. Thank you for the lift, Nilda. And Silvano, thank you for minding Massimo for me." It would help not to have her hands full of toddler if her middle or eldest sons needed some kind of help or wanted more attention.

Besides which, Massimo was the safest one to leave with the other woman’s husband. Enrico had found out and had already taken shameless advantage of the kind man's nature when she left them a
so abruptly last weekend, wringing a disturbing number of sugared treats to 'assuage' their worry over their strangely acting mother when in fact they were really only jarred by her unavailable presence several hours after the fact.

Loriana Rampino sniffed, mostly for effect and not because she felt more irritation than normal because she had agreed with her daughter that maybe the youngest child should be left somewhere less sunny while they were visiting the beach, then allowed Federico to take her hand and lead the way to the sandy stretch of land he had been looking forward to all week. About since when he learned there was a beach that even Silvano couldn't say was unsafe, and he had the opportunity to get his newly found grandparents to go along with them so he could explore further than just within the sight of his mother.

It wasn't something the boys could do down in southern Italy, swimming in the sea with others, not anywhere public and certainly not near the Iron Fort or known Vongola properties. Her boys had learned in safely contained swimming pools, the novelty of a massive body of water full of interesting things was more than a little alluring to them.

Sonya's little comune had a seawall to prevent rough waters from threatening swimmers and somehow didn't entirely count as 'public' in the minds of the Superbi household, which she suspected she would learn the why for in time.

…which probably included into the why her personal bodyguard felt entirely alright with leaving her 'unsupervised' with her parents in a small village they had only visited once before. Obviously there was the Superbi men that were equally as obviously there for 'her and her sons' protection, but they would be removed a distance instead of within arm's reach as would be normal in public for the little family.

Fiorella took a deep breath, very firmly retaining her hold on Enrico's arm instead of allowing her middle child to join the eldest to be the 'first' on the beach no matter how much he sulked about it. The thief she really came to see today probably had a better and less obvious explanation for her, assuming the worst was a bad habit to get into.

Although, no matter how often she repeated that line to herself, she never managed to let go of all her suspicions.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 23rd of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"I beg your fucking pardon?"

Silvano drew himself up to a slow halt, peering through the oddly shaped foyer to the second floor where that voice had come from.

Hadn't the Sword Emperor been taking those stairs when they were just being invited into the castle themselves?

"...ooh shit." Nilda breathed out, glancing down to the puzzled expression on the redhead he had been almost introduced to before that sudden and short exclamation.

"Is this going to happen a lot?" Inquired the other woman, shifting her weight to the side to give her a touch more access if the piece at the small of her back was needed. "Because I like spending time with my baby sis when she's not colossally pissed off, or someone else being pissed off, so on..."
"I honestly have no idea what Master Tyr could've said to gain that response." His wife disavowed their involvement quickly, raising a hand and threading fingers through her unbound locks distractedly. "He rather failed to say much for his reasons for accompanying us here. However, the last time we visited she did not seem all that 'pissed off'."

Massimo, seeing flashing sliver locks flickering near his face, reached out and took a decent hunk of hair to fist and shove in his mouth in hopes it would soothe his likely aching gums.

"Hello, bambino." Cooed the Russian with a smirk, holding out a finger sparking with golden-yellow Flames temptingly when the child fussied with dissatisfaction. "I've got a much better thing for you to chew on."

She didn't try to take the youngest Vongola from him, and Nilda did take ruthless advantage to reorder herself and her hair further away from the distracted young child, so the head of the Superbi Famiglia didn't move away from her. "I then should take it you are Nurse Primakova?"

"I've never been famous before," quipped back the nurse, ignoring the strings of drool leaking down her wrist as Massimo subsided with the relief she was supplying him, "preferably you know me from something aside being Nya's elder sibling."

"I was more interested in the medical advisory sent out that comes explicitly from your work, especially as it pertained to young children."

"Yeah… that was terrifying." Tatiana Primakova mused, almost moving her right hand until she recalled its utilization as a pacifying device. Instead smoothing the hand of her left along the back of her neck while she thought back to something, only to huff and cock a wry grin for the drowsy toddler. "But that's entirely an acceptable alternative, thank you."

"Are there bad alternatives?" Questioned the swordsman curiously, still not sure about staying close to the Sun Flame user even if she was tending to his charge's discomfort. At least not for long, just long enough to get him settled down for a mid-morning nap perhaps.

"You should hear the bullshit I get in Mafia Land when some of the residents realize I have a Cloud for a sister." Making a few faces at the teary-eyed toddler, the redhead then turned back to his wife. "And while we weren't pissed off, your little lady was-"

"Oh no. No, if Nono wants to speak of it later then by all means." Sarcastically drawled out the lithe ash blonde who swung over a balcony railing to drop to the staircase and descend to the ground floor. "I can't wait to tell him where to shove that."

A sharp, grey-eyed glanced over the group waiting for her below, and Silvano found himself with the rare opportunity to be dismissed from importance in seconds. The youngest of them was given more attention, and that was a bare split second more than the others.

"I did not take the offer as an insult, myself." Tyr observed after her, leaning over the railing she had simply jumped with little care.

"To a native, who has a premade network of local supports and contacts made up over a lifetime, it's not. It's a real honor." The sarcastic eye roll that accompanied her words ensured no one would assume she thought the same and pausing halfway down the stairs she turned back to look at the master assassin for only a few moments more. "I'm not a native, account for that in the restrictions and you get a whole lot of nasty implications. Björn's on hold for you, line three, and the files he sent on for you are in the sitting room at the end of the hall down the other direction on the second floor."
With that sorted out and somehow without electing a reproving response from the man she had treated with such behavior, the mistress of the castle descended the rest of the stairs to speak to her sister without raising her voice yet more.

"Should we get him some aspirin?"

"Err... do you have children's aspirin?"

"No, you quarter a pill and crush it into powder between two spoons. Then mix it with a little sugar and water... or I guess honey." The younger woman considered it for a moment before posing a question to her back. "Is there any real difference between aspirin and children's aspirin?"

"...basically, it's almost exactly the dosage you suggested." Tatiana admitted after her moment of consideration and a thoughtful frown. "Baby aspirin is actually exactly one fourth of the same dosage for adults, it's kind of weird you know that little trick."

"Renato got Shamal when the brat was three. Excuse me, three-and-a-half." Rolling her eyes again, this time without so much attitude, the thief remained about where Nilda had retreated to in order to avoid the toddler's reach. "Why do you think it's weird?"

The nurse merely hummed, then shrugged. "Well, it's a better suggestion than that really weird one that typically gets suggested for teething problems. Why people like soothing inflamed gums with whisky or rum is beyond me, aside being a strange way to disinfect open mouth sores and a great way to start a dependency on alcohol to sooth pain stupidly early."

"Yes or no?"

"...no, the kid's not in much pain nor is his gums inflamed that much. He's just tired of being grumpy and sore, and a bit impatient." Carefully extracting her finger, to much disgruntlement from the toddler, she gifted the child with a wry smirk as she wiped off the drool that had slowly leaked down her wrist on her sensible trouser pants leg. "Sorry, kiddo. It's nature and not an injury. I can't do much more for you without making things worse."

Taking that as the break in conversation as it was, Nilda gestured from him to the sisters more interested in the child in his arms than him for not usual reasons. "Silvano, as you were likely aware, the redhead is Tatiana Primakova and the blonde is Sonya Bazanova. Sisters, Sun and Storm-Cloud users, and completely Russian."

"Miss Bazanova, our thanks for your forbearance-" He tried to greet politely, only forced to a stop to grip the child in his arm before the youngest Vongola could lunge out of them. Apparently, his aim was to grab hold of ruby-red strands of hair to hold hostage for continued Sun Flame treatment. Supposedly since the nurse had stopped before he wanted her to.

Bazanova glanced down at the child once more before turning to follow the longer end of the hallway on the ground floor on to somewhere else. "There's a library on the third floor, Mister Silvery-White, you so much as crease a page and I'll throw you out a window... after giving Tats the kid."

Primakova smirked at him, when he apparently made his confusion as such a short non-greeting and irritable non-offer obvious. "Frankly, given what she's threatened me and our brother about when her books are concerned, that's a big allowance for her. As you probably don't want to shake her hand, nor do either of you really need reminders about being neighbors or keeping drama to bearable levels, the more important part is the kid in your arms and being a good hostess."
"Do you often explain for your sister?" Nilda inquired delicately, only to earn a pointed look.

"No one shakes Nya's hand, not when she can crush stainless steel between her fingers. She's not a fan of talking to people she doesn't know, the fact your husband has a nickname without actually interacting with her is phenomenal. Even if you share it." Wagging the finger young Massimo Vongola was watching for an opportunity to grab and shove back into his mouth again, she instead gestured to the upper floors. "The allowance to go to the library is odd, take it for granted and you'd really piss her off."

"That doesn't quite answer the question."

"Do I often ensure people know what they risk when it comes to my baby sister? Nope." Tatiana planted a hand on her hip, glancing over his wife from crown to toe. "But then again, I used to know everyone she did. I don't know you, so... I'd rather cover my bases. I never appreciate it when people complain about how bestial or thuggish it is my baby sister is when she smashes all the bones in a guy's hands in revenge for something. Like hitting on her, or spilling a drink on her current book, or just generally annoying the shit out of her."

The Rain pursed her lips. "Point."

Silvano glanced down at his own hands holding a child, musing on how difficult it would be to try to fence with a broken main hand... which would also rather incapacitate his ability to manage Massimo's never-ending quest to soothe his gums. It was perhaps for the best the child prevented the more common greeting gesture of a handshake, there were several ways he could see a simple gesture could turn into either an insult or a snub depending on the individuals involved and that feature.

Looking back up at the nurse, he decided to simply accept the invitation as the younger sister's bid to keep relationships decent. The library might prove quiet enough to lull the child into a mid-morning nap until his mother returned with his brothers. "Does she have any good books?"

"Well... if you read Russian yes. We're still trying to find her decent Italian literature."
Tyr slit the tape and opened the next designated folder with a small penknife from his pockets, examining the flyer and pictures various real estate brokers sent the Lackey on his behalf. Critically reviewing the number of residents it could hold verses how difficult he knew a similar size would be to maintain, he had to admit it was almost perfect… if it was for sale and not merely listed to lease. "How long until this property is on the market?"

"The only problem with that estate is that the owner has never been in the market to sell, and the property has been listed a fair number of times over the last few decades." Bjorn pointed out a bit thickly, which included with the odd slurp and chewing noise meant he was likely eating dinner while speaking with him. "Even if I ask for you, and I will, the answer will likely not be positive until it's been on the market for at least half or even several years without a new rent arrangement. With the size, and the leasing history behind it, I can safely say someone else is more likely to lease it before the owners would consider selling."

The proposed estate did not seem to be of better quality than others he had reviewed with the younger man over the morning, most with only one or two fairly major logistical issues the Lightning-Storm hadn't know of due to not being informed of the finer details of what the Head of the Varia Assassination Squads was looking for. Which made him ambivalent over the proposed series of actions, and suspicious he knew why a non-available estate was provided to an assassin when it wasn't entirely what he requested due to living owners. "I think not."

It was the third non-acceptable file slipped into the stack so far. However, given they had gone through forty estate summaries over the past three hours, he could allow the Lackey his small amusements in return for the effort on his behalf.

"Very well." A paused in which the Sword Emperor was suspicious he took a mouthful of whatever he was eating to quickly swallow down, and they continued onto the next file in the set of them marked with Mafia Land courier stamps on the bindings. "Alright, the next one is located in the Province of L'Aquila-

"No."

"...and so, the one after that one is located in the Province of Rieti." Smoothly continued the Lackey without missing a beat or needing to manage a mouthful of his meal being in the way. As the Icelander had no idea what he was looking for aside the hard-outer limits for size, and such sudden refusals likely made little to no sense to him, the fact he had yet to say something for the twelfth refusal this call was moderately impressive. "Almost right next door."

Tyr considered it, and the glossy pictures sent along showcasing what seemed to be an older if expansive farmhouse set into the side of a gently sloping mountain. Not enough space to make what would be needed, a slightly smaller than desired stable standing structure to start in on with, not ideally located. "I believe this may prove to be too small for my aims, as well as being near a location I do not wish to be."

He'd crowd out a new famiglia attempting to force themselves to their feet, well before they could distinguish themselves from just any loose groupings of criminals. Less likely, it was entirely possible Tyr's Varia would end up at the wrong end of any confrontation. Unlikely, but a risk to account for
when weighing the value of this property against what he was searching for.

"The rest of the files are then likely also too small then, even if they are within your price range and fit the limitations you've set for me."

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose for a moment.

"Frankly, given the size you seem to want, most properties I can find you are always going to be too small." Bjørn pointed out to break the silence when it seemed he was finished with bolting down his meal, now shuffling papers on his distant end of the call. "Even fifty thousand more euros would widen the pool of properties I can investigate even from here, less plantation or farmhouses and more manor estates or small castles, and it would also improve the quality of features to hide something within as you seem to want."

"I have not set aside that amount for this aim on top of the funds I have already disclosed." Then there was paying the younger man for his time and effort yet still, even if the Lackey couldn't find him something within the directions already established.

"...I could do something about that, if you can spare a measure of time before you need to obtain an estate." Allowed the Mafia Land agent leadingly, the ambient noise on the far side of the call included the exchange of significant piles of paper now instead of flipping through lighter amounts of bound paper.

Glancing around and factoring in he had ensured a thief could afford a castle on the seemingly random work schedule that came with being what was functionally a single-parent, Tyr admitted the young man had at least one excellent recommendation to his name. Had Sonya not already bought this property, it would be nearly perfect for his needs.

Too small to hold everyone he needed it to, a bit too expensive, and yet again not ideally located for his assassins. Such details could be waited out, with merely recruitment methods and given the train line being built to reduce travel complications.

"And how much will you take for your cut?"

"I have only a modest ten to twenty percent of any profits as my surcharge. As long as there is money being made and depending on how much profit is being made." Bjørn admitted bluntly. "If you lose money, I'll at least replace the funds to the amount you started from."

That was… odd. "Will your patron allow for that?"

"Dama has left her excess money left to my discretion, as long as I show a net profit and things happen in reasonable time frames she does not care much. Or at least as long as I inform her if we start to run low or something is not realistically possible in the budget."

"Low risk investments?" He questioned next, mentally ordering his next few steps accounting for a longer delay versus what he could do now if he turned down the offer.

"I can if you wish, but those take years to pay off." Responded the Lackey slowly, which made it clear that was not what he had in mind.

To take that risk or not?

Bjørn very obviously was the assistant of a thief, decently opportunistic and seemingly had a good handle on what was appropriate to demand in exchange for his time. Or at least what was realistic to charge criminal clients for his services, and how to amass enough results to keep said unlawful
patrons satisfied with his work.

…on the other hand, he had just annoyed the hell out of his lady by mentioning an offer Nono Vongola had contemplated giving her. Which wasn't even the news he had expected to irritate her, and he still wasn't entirely sure why being offered the position as Fiorella’s Mafia Home Tutor had garnered the reaction it had.

Obviously Timoteo was attempting to limit the influence Sonya had on his wife, or at least structure it to only be positive at best or neutral at worse. Tyr hadn't thought much of it at the time he overheard the possibility from Visconti, and his assumption had been that as a Home Tutor then at least the thief would be obviously barred from influencing the young Sky or Sky-possible children in line for succession and silence the first beginning rumors of sinister Soviet influences on the Vongola Famiglia.

Nothing would be done quickly as it was, even if there was the best possible fitting estate in the remainder of the files Bjørn had assembled Tyr didn't have the personnel to manage any kind of property immediately. Especially not one that required immediate upkeep or renovations before becoming habitable or just to remove a 'condemned' label.

Even omitting the length of time purchasing a property would take if the two of them found something, he had at least a few weeks to a couple good months in which to build up more funds while the minutia was handled. Then, perhaps if he shaved a few assassins off their current tasks and they survived such to bring back funds from non-Vongola assassinations, he could manage buying the other half of the mountain behind this property and build something to serve as temporary housing on his own instead of looking through what others had built before.

"How much would you need to make a decent start? Assuming a short return period."

"That would be higher-risk than I can recommend, Master Tyr. Nothing is done quickly with money, unless you intend to lose it all." There was a somewhat annoying hum, more sounds of paperwork being shuffled, and then the taps of a fairly heavy pen against a muffling pad of paper. "The quickest, and messiest, investments are all the type that… well, ruin lives when they fail. I rather like my life, thank you."

"In that case, I may as well get a loan." Dismissed the Sword Emperor simply.

"You could." Agreed the Lackey in a similar tone.

…now even the woman's aide was starting to sound a bit condescending towards him. Tyr was rather certain he disliked this turn of fortune, even if it was one he walked into himself and had yet to find a way to assuage without making it worse. "Assuming a half-year or even a full one to manage the money, how much of a return can you see for three hundred thousand in euros?"

"Low risk? Five to fifteen percent. Standard? Fifteen to maybe twenty of the original funds. All assuming the market behaves predictably, which is never a sure thing and you should assume a five to eighty percent loss of the starting funds as a matter of fact." Said solid pen he was using scribbled away on some surface, it was too distant for the master assassin to identify as paper or another material susceptible to ink. "Then again… I have a somewhat strange investment opportunity to suggest."

Which he suspected would be the real reason the younger man raised the point at all. "And that would be…?"

"See, I recently did do badly with an investment. Lost a significant amount, which is irritating and
sets back a few of the plans I had for the extra money. It will not do more than delay things, but even
that much is easy to swallow as just a learning experience. However, instead of bothering my Dama
in the middle of the time period she has set aside for her other responsibilities to make up the
difference… you could loan us the difference and I'll see to it you at least gain a net fifty percent
increase to your loaned funds come winter when Dama finishes the last of her responsibilities in due
time.

"Are you certain you can promise that amount?" If it was fifty percent of what personal funds he
might sink into his housing problem, it sounded too good even to a novice of investments and was
entirely too neat to seem real. It might just be Tyr's unfamiliarity with the process of investing money
to make money, but as the Lackey had already claimed fast investment opportunities as 'high-risk'…

"Master Tyr, I work for a woman that has lost thirteen four-hundred Troy ounces of pure gold
among the other trade items she stores away for unexpected expenses. Who capped out the business
expense account Mafia Land contractors are allowed to rack up to smuggle their work in and not
lose too much of their personal funds while so contracted. Twice. And… a thief who uses museums
to, and I am quoting what she claimed to me as to why she robbed the building on a whim, 'shop for
furniture' within. Worse of all, all she kept was the damn camera she used in her work at the end.
The rest of that job is still being sold and will make up the bulk of how I pay you back from as those
items need time to be sold for the best profit."

…well. "This is assuming nothing happens to incur yet more expenses on her before that suggested
payout point."

"I can sell a few things to make up a paltry half a million in euros to pay out with if I have to. I just
merely do not have the assets in liquid form right this moment to cover the loss I incurred, finding
and retrieving the trade items to sell would initially cost me yet more money before I restore the
accounts. Which then means I must default to bothering Dama for her backup trade goods." Bjørn's
soft fidgeting sounds thankfully ceased, a more businesslike sound of him punching numbers into
what was apparently a mechanical calculator and likely scribbling down different notes worked
busily echoed down the line for a long moment. "This risk? Is mostly on my end. I don't need you,
and you don't really need me. Eventually we, you, or just I will find a suitable location for sale for a
suitable amount somewhere. I can widen the selection you can pick from if you help me out, and
possibly hasten this entire process along, depending on how flexible your timetable and wallet are."

Tyr was apparently silent thinking it over a touch too long, because it didn't take much of that for the
Lackey to continue.

"I would like to pay back my Dama for paying a stupid amount to a miser for my training, preferably
within a semi-reasonable timeframe. It is my personal goal, Master Tyr, that motivates me to offer
this opportunity to you."

"The offer sounds… just a little too good."

"It should. As we can dispense with the illusion of my being remotely able to mismanage your funds
knowingly without horribly dying for such insult, we can also dispense with attempting to hide how
much I would appreciate this arrangement. If you can put up an unrealistic amount to invest short-
term with, but do not feel as if high-risk with unknown assets is something you can accept, I can at
least set unrealistic returns from the assets I can manage longer to eventually make up a short-fall
later. When it's not inconvenient for any of us."

The question in the end was how far was he prepared to trust a financial manager of a thief with his
personal funds?
"This, nonna, nonno, is Sonya Bazanova." Fiorella introduced, a little distracted by the entire wall nestled between two windows that seemed to be a multi-faceted bank of security monitors and not a flat wall. "Um... Sonya, my mother Loriana and my father Aleandro Rampino."

Her recently refreshed mother gave the same feature no attention whatsoever as she greeted their hostess, as if it was not strange to see in a half-furnished sitting room. Although she wasn't entirely sure if that was from just being unsure if it was normal for Russians or if Loriana was just being self-conscious again.

The fact her daughter 'married up' never really seemed to sit right in her mother, however grateful she was that her only child found what she thought was a good match.

Sonya, rising to her feet while juggling an entire ball of strange looking pearly white string and the needles she had been knitting with in one hand to return her mother's handshake, gave absolutely no sign she was discomforted by the physical gesture or remotely embarrassed for spying on Nilda's husband and Massimo in a nearby library. Given how the poor woman had gone stiff when Fiorella kissed her cheeks, she privately betted the thief was acting instead of actually being that fine with it.

Ooh, she hadn't thought of that. 'Clouds' seemed to all be somewhat standoffish creatures, nationality aside since that pertained to both Visconti and Sonya in equal measures. They all probably didn't like physical gestures to go along with their dealings, as a norm. Maybe she should've said Russians didn't do physical contact as much as them...

Her father, taking advantage of one of their hostess' hands being free, also reached over to shake her hand and compound his daughter's slight chagrin. "Thank you for letting us clean up here."

"...it's safer for the kids here than a hotel, so I had no problem at all with it." Returned the ash blonde easily, after a moment of very visibly taking in both of Fiorella's parents as a unit instead of just as an idea she had from their conversation over a phone. "Will you be staying for lunch? Cesare was absolutely delighted to have Italians to cook for and went a little overboard with his plans. I fear we may need the help making an 'acceptable' dent in it, so we don't hurt his feelings."

Loriana blurted a laugh, encouraged by the wry bent to the thief's lips as she delivered that tidbit, and even if she claimed to her daughter's face a desire to 'not infringe on what time you have for your friends, passerotta', she immediately agreed for both her and her husband. Aleandro was a bit more restrained, with a small wry twist to his own mouth. "I suppose then we shall indeed, if only to steal a little more time with the grandkids."

Reminded, Sonya glanced backwards at the improbable bank of screens behind her before looking at Fiorella. "Tats took a look at your youngest's mouth, because she's a worry-wart like that. She didn't find anything too wrong, other than he was a bit sore and grumpy with it. No inflammation or sores to worry about."

"Oh! Your sister is a dear," it was her third child, after Federico the whole process of her sons teething had become less scary and stress-inducing for her, but the reassurance was never unappreciated, "is she nearby?"

"She went for a run, she should be back just in time to clean up for lunch in about half an hour." Glancing at the apparently only just started project in her hands, the thief shrugged and reseated.
herself on the couch she had been occupying when they entered. "I'm still trying to figure out how to
knit silk, so excuse my distraction. It's been kicking my ass all morning."

"Tatiana, Sonya's older sister, is a professional nurse." Fiorella supplied for her confused parents,
warmed by the Sun's likely absent checkup on her baby even if there shouldn't be and indeed wasn't
any issue to be found. "Sonya herself is an author and a... amateur historian?"

"Sort of still, but not for long. I'm thinking of writing a history text for my mother to use, actually." Absently responded the Russian, doing something equally as improbable but probably humanly
possible with a few loops and her flashing silver needles... only to immediately unravel the entire
thing when she apparently didn't like the look of the result. "I have nothing published outside of the
Soviet Union, so translating my previous work and the second book I need to run past my editor
might be something... to... do."

Now she really wanted to maybe get a sneak preview, especially if that text had more to do with
instructing criminal children of history in other countries than just Soviet Russia's. Either way, it
would be fascinating enough to make up for trying to read a textbook as well as informative.

Blinking at the absolute mess of loops she hoped made sense to her in her hands, Sonya looked back
up at them. "Silvano and your youngest are on the third floor, in my library. You should probably
pry them out of there."

…but they all could see very clearly that Nilda's sweet-tempered husband and young Massimo were
in a library, it was on that bank of-

The feature she had been looking at askance at suddenly disappeared as if there was nothing there,
and by the bitter twist to her lips now it seemed that it was another of the Flame users that heeded the
Russian at fault now. Likely a Mist, given what little she knew of their skills.

Which would be why her parents weren't paying the suddenly missing feature any mind whatsoever,
they probably couldn't see it in the first place. It was curious to be one allowed to see it, and she
wasn't sure if she appreciated it. Conversely, given how much she had disliked that very thing
happening around her before.

"...you let them into your library? Should I be jealous?" Fiorella attempted a little woodenly, well
aware there was a pause just a little too long to be covert in hiding a topic from her parents.

Sonya's slightly bitter smirk turned crooked all of a sudden, bitter and crooked was a strange look on
her when at best she was normally just watchful and silent, and the woman batted a hand at the three
of them even if that made the silk fall apart in her lap. "No, it's just that now that everyone's got
something else to do that's probably the quietest part of my castle aside the bedrooms. Hawk's built
all the bookcases, he's just out filling them now. Verde's kind of put it in some order, but he and
Peter abandoned it when the glassblowing equipment and the latter's gem cutting tools arrived."

"I know Hawk, the poor man." The amnesiac, she met him that very embarrassing morning when
she went to place her breakfast dishes in the kitchen for Cesare to wash then very nearly knocked
into the man. "But... forgive me, who are Peter and Verde? Were they the ones you said you were
waiting for?"

"I'm not surprised you haven't met them yet, Verde's enough of a hermit that if Adrik wasn't there to
basically be his nursemaid I suspect the man would frequently 'forget' to stop what he's doing and
eat." Another pause, this one more introspective, and the younger Russian simply shook her head.
"Peter's... well. That's not my story to tell, but he's not the outgoing sort anymore. If he ever was in
the first place. And no, it was Galina and the Chinese pair I was expecting. Almost everyone's here
Discarding her silk again, but this time with the needles, the thief sighed and rubbed the back of her neck.

"I don't think I'm going to get much further, so let's take this into the dining room for some coffee and not exclude your parents anymore."

"...oh. Oh! Mamma, papà! I am so sorr-"

"It is fine, passerotta." Aleandro assured her, lifting a hand to run through her hair as if she was fifteen all over again. "We came to see you and the grandchildren, and we did both. If you need a few minutes to catch up with a friend letting us impose on her then we can get a cup of coffee while you do, and also spend more time with your children while you're so distracted."

"Papà!"

"I thought the 'catching up' was planned for after lunch?" Sonya inquired curiously, just to compound her chagrin some more, lifting a shoulder for a shrug when Fiorella's mother shot her a sly smirk for it. "Well, there'll be napping children and still half of a rather nice bottle of wine she brought the last time we can finish off. Why not?"

"Exactly." Loriana agreed with a sage nod, patting her slightly flustered daughter on the arm as she followed her husband out of the sitting room and straight into the dining hall and the kitchens you could see from the hallway. "You girls have fun, now."

The thief held up a finger just before she would've asked, waiting a few more beats until Cesare very loudly exclaimed his absolute pleasure to prepare a tray of coffee for the elderly Italian couple and a question if they'd like any 'nibbles' to go along with it. "...now."

"Sonya... what was with that wall?"

"Usov."

"Who is-" There was a little boy sitting on the couch she could only see now. "...I guess that is Usov?"

"A pleasure, Lady Vongola." Quietly enthused the young brunette with a gap-toothed, cockeyed grin just for them both. "And yes, as you probably suspect, I am a Mist."

Sliding off the couch cushions in an entirely improbable way, the child turned back to the woman he had been supplying with Mist-Constructed security feeds of other locations and people.

"I'm going to go back to my dad now, Dama."

The heavy sigh and vastly irritated look the child was then pinned with probably meant that word was either rude or not what Sonya wanted to be referred as. "Stop colluding with Bjørn."

"Never!" Exclaimed the child at what should've been full volume, but it seemed as if his voice didn't carry at all beyond the walls of the sitting room. Which wasn't physically possible, there were no doors to block sounds. "Bye Lady Vongola."

Strangely, the child evaporated into a poof of indigo smoke. Which only lasted three seconds and cleared up improbably fast.
"...Sonya? What does 'dama' mean?"

"...means 'my lady'." Apparently socializing with her parents had taken a rather extreme toll on the younger woman's tolerances, because the thief seemed strangely tired and rather short on words right now. "I'm going to go have a cigarette, you should probably corral your kids before they get deeper into the third floor. You, and they, probably don't want to meet the Mirror Lady's pet."

Nilda should've had her eldest two in hand… and to be honest aside the fact the wall had been turned into a bank of security monitors she hadn't checked who Sonya was keeping an eye on. Enrico could've entirely enlisted his older brother's help and slid away from her bodyguard somehow. She wouldn't put it past him.

"Wait. What is the Mirror Lady's pet?" Fiorella asked, apparently a touch too slow, to the empty room.

(Saturday the 23rd of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"It's not that bad. It's... just... Sonya? Help me out?"

"I don't know..." drawled the thief sarcastically rolling over on her bed to grab up the last wineglass, "I kind of want to hear how 'it's not that bad' myself."

That was... not particularly promising. Nilda rubbed at her forehead, wracking her mind on how to explain some of the things Vongola did that 'wasn't that bad'. There were things that were 'that bad', but it wasn't polite to say anything an outsider of the Famiglia and she had little idea what would or would not annoy Fiorella if she tried 'delicately worded things' again.

The brunette in question rubbed her face with a hand, then raked it back through her hair as she set her back against the Russian's bedroom wall. "Why criminals?"

"Why not criminals?" Sonya inquired rather bluntly, surprisingly when the Rain had expected little to no help from that corner aside the security to prevent even Superbi ears overhearing what the lady of Vongola thought about their lifestyle. "We have an entire sub-group of the human race, predictable patterns of development or not we're a large number of mainly either outright manipulative assholes or led by them. This way, we don't overly screw over the common people and instead generally fuck around with each other."

"But you all could do so much good, if you'd-"

"Fiorella, human nature alone would not have allowed Flame users to become that useful, however much faith you have in your fellow man." She pointed out, not even waiting for her to finish her thought. "Either just from basic jealousy for someone more 'gifted' from those that worked hard for their skills, from one organization 'targeting' another's pool of users for either death or recruitment to deny or gain more, or straight out religious intolerance, our already low numbers would then get worse than they already are. We'd lose yet more of the lore we're only just now recovering, of the kind that my sister and Shamal suffered through to dis- or re-discover. If Flame use was widely known of, users would be either horded or threatened for just existing with an ability few can use. That doesn't always mean we'd survive, or could accomplish anything significant with or without each other, while world powers obsessed over us. Putting that into perspective with the very recent World War, and nothing good could've come from that."
"I understand the whole 'secret society' part, Sonya, it's just the unlawful part I question."

"Without access to the usual services, like law enforcement, how the hell does a Flame user from one town prevent a Flame user from another fucking around with their neighbors? Is ignoring that kind of shit right, or does our awareness and use of Flames require us to protect those around from others?" Placing her empty wine glass on the floor next to Fiorella, Sonya rolled over onto her back and settled herself in to lounge through the conversation. "Once you start allowing this or that for this or that reason, exactly where does it stop? Should there be regiments of Storms in every military, tasked with simply Disintegrating everything in their way? Should secret security forces enlist Mists to prevent being discovered bending common fucking decency in their work?"

While her charge thought through the logistical problem the she pointed out, Nilda finished topping off the empty wine glasses for their second round. "Where do you get 'religious intolerance' from?"

"From 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'. How the hell do Mists not end up as 'witches'?" She questioned, a hand waving in the air over the foot of her bed the only visible sign of the Russian. "I mean, even in a non-King James variant of your 'holy' book, the term is 'mekhasheph'. Which no one seems to agree on the meaning of, if it's just herbalists or anyone of 'alternate' career bents. Witch or 'poisoners'. Then there were Jewish books on magic around the time the older versions were written, which then brings a lot more questions to the table of the uncomfortable sort. Like when the 'witch hunts' became a thing, how long have they been going on, and did Christians ever really stop? Are there young Flame users killed by their parents for being 'different'?"

Fiorella blanched, glancing at a blank wall behind her low cushioned rough-built bench, behind which Tatiana and Silvano were minding her sons so their mother could finally get some of her burning questions answered.

"Think that might be a bit below the belt?"

"How? I have Shamal, she has three sons..." Sonya rolled over, setting her chin on the footboard of her bed just to see them both clearly again. "There's also the Flame orphanage Vongola runs, and the school house my mother now runs back in Moscow. How can I not think about this kind of thing?"

"And Catholics do it more than others?" Nilda snipped, only to get a blank look in return.

"I said 'religious intolerance', and frankly Christians as a whole tend to have terrible amounts of tolerances when it comes to other faiths. As do Muslims. And everyone else against whichever group." She added thoughtfully, humming a little under her breath before continuing. "Aside major religious groups, there's still intolerant rural and less structured religions that might have better or worse reactions to something solidly 'spiritual magic' like Dying Will Flames when it comes to their young children. I know there's still a few wild tribes around the world that absolutely avoid outside contacts, if they have any Dying Will Flame able children..."

Conversely, actually, that did at least suggest something very positive about Vongola's orphan collection policies. Which was something the Rain rather honestly doubted would happen, especially from this quarter.

Although, she did really appreciate how sneakily the thief had arranged the entire conversation to end up where it got to... if that was on purpose.

It was a little hard to tell.

And slightly insulting to boot.
Either Sonya was trained in conversation gambits better than any Cloud in existence would bother to learn, or it really was happenstance. Nilda wasn't entirely sure what possibility scared her more.

…well, she asked for help.

"As far as I know it, the phenomena of Dying Will Flames is formally accepted by the Church as a sign of God's favor." She offered in return for the backhanded aid. "Probably the effort of a concerned Sky on the same subject, on behalf of a particularly mischievous Mist Guardian. I could check into it for you…"

"I prefer reading historical accounts rather than listen to hearsay." Countered the thief blandly, giving Fiorella a small smirk for her obvious confusion before taking back her filled wine glass. "Mrs. Silvery-White did ask for help. It's better for you to come to the conclusion than for someone else to present a fact for you to believe."

Lady Vongola blinked back at her blankly. Then she pursed her lips, but her attempt at a disapproving expression was ruined when she couldn't entirely keep the growing smirk of her own face. "I see. How does Nilda know to 'return the favor'?"

"Guessing. A lot of this lifestyle is unstated or assumed but either rude or lethal to not do or ignore. It kind of depends greatly if you want a connection or not, or some method of contact with this or that individual." Draining off her third glass of wine in the last hour, Sonya actually sat upright on her bed to face her guests. "Your husband has put out, through poor Tyr, that he is interested in hiring me to be your Mafia Home Tutor."

"Oh… actually, that would be del."

"Fiorella. It's an insult." She very patiently interrupted. "It should be my mother, as the head of the school I'm affiliated to, he should be asking. He's scorning her, my mother, even knowing I'm retired from being the principal of a mafia-connected school and I'm still not a 'free agent'. There's no way he could not know, given Ganauche and Mrs. Silvery-White both probably passed it on."

Lady Vongola froze, breathed in deeply, then sighed. "May I have your mother's number, Sonya? I feel as if I should apologize-"

"Don't do it on Nono's behalf, my mother won't be impressed with that." Warned the thief, glancing around at her bedroom for something she apparently didn't find. "I'll give you Lisa's number in a bit, after warning you about how Russians do phone-calls."

Nilda dripped the last of the wine into the glass she held out for her to do so. "I thought you told the Sword Emperor there was another problem with foreign Home Tutors?"

"As a non-native of Italy, I have few connections and rather like it that way. If I took the position of Fiorella's Home Tutor, I'd teach her to make and maintain her own connections by contacting and putting in the effort with individuals that would suit a female head of household in the mafia. Which would apply to us both. Then, when we formally break things off, Nono could use the fact we'd likely share connections to cry foul on Fiorella's behalf in the future when I piss him off. Why would I willingly put myself into that trap?"

"Obviously there should be some clauses to avoid that…" Nilda trailed off in the face of the unimpressed expression aimed at her. "What's wrong now?"

"No matter what I do, there will be nothing that can uncouple Fiorella's reputation with my own. Even now, and we just talk every now and again. If I'm not careful, for years upon years later,
there's going to be thousands upon thousands of ways to use the restrictions against interference from Home Tutors on an organization's growth opportunities and succession against me. Fiorella has to take care of her kids, I have to live around here, and Shamal might say this or that thing to her kids while she's asking a question or needs advice. I don't have the patience to put up with that crap and will NOT appreciate the brats being brought into things."

Sonya held up a hand before either woman could say anything.

"To be... fair. It might not be Nono or anyone in Vongola to try that. It could be whomever I step on the toes of next, someone Fiorella decided to avoid or snub for reasons of her own, some asshole that needs us all distracted, so on. And, because I know it's a question, I should not be given special dispensation to teach her. No prospective Mafia Home Tutor should be given that. The reason they're used is because everyone knows of and respects the limits of a Tutor, if we started bending the rules that respect will erode concurrently until the various brats needing one would be better off making due with sub-par remnants of a syndicate that might kill them for this or that asshole instead and not a uninfluenced outsider who would at the very least keep them alive long enough to learn better."

"Everyone bends the rules already." Nilda pointed out practically, ignoring the raised eyebrow the mother of three gave her for that admission.

"Exactly. If you don't make it something special, no one really cares if a few rules get bent in the process of ensuring their sprogs or next leaders are the best trained as humanly possible. No one bitches to the Vindice either, thankfully. Vongola starts excusing this or that, the rest of southern Italy will do the same. Which will spread to the north, and on beyond you to Greece and France, and on so forth. With this one thing, then others will excuse that one thing, and then more things, and on."

"...um, excuse me... the 'Vindice'?"

Sonya glanced down at the collection of empty wine glasses and the equally empty bottle of wine sitting on the floorboards, then to the woman they all were here to help just a little bit. "There's not remotely enough alcohol left for that conversation... unless you'd like to try some vodka."

"Erm, is there much of a difference between vodka and wine?"

"Potatoes and grapes, and about eight times the alcohol."

Fiorella looked in askance at her abandoned glass, then shook her head. "I would need to work up to that, I think. A glass might be more than enough to knock me off my feet..."

"A shot." Sonya corrected with mild amusement. "You either take a shot or a gup from the bottle. And for the love of fuck, do not sip vodka."

"Definitely more than enough to have me make a fool of myself." Sighed the mother of three. "It's been a little too long since I drank anything aside wine, I'll need to work on my tolerances before attempting hard liquors."

"Then we should probably collect your kids and go home." Nilda chipped in, bracing a hand against the Russian's bed to push herself somewhat unsteadily to her feet. "I know Silvano delights in being allowed to look after your sons, but I fear for my husband's virtue when young Master Enrico gets up to mischief."

"My sister might or might not help, it depends on her moods."

"Silvano or Enrico?"
"Either."

With a snort for that particularly unhelpful comment, the Rain extended a hand to help her charge off her more comfortable seat.

"Fiorella, two last things. If it seems too good to be true, it likely is even if it's not expressly impacting you." Sonya bent to gather up the empty tray from their long-since empty cheese and cracker platter as well as the glassware, then gave her a small smile. "Also, would you happen to know when Shamal's graduation is... or even the number for his school? Renato usually tells me, or collects me for it, but I'm not actually sure if he can manage it this year..."

"I'll look through my contact book the moment we get back and call you with it, even if I must dig through a phonebook." Fiorella promised gratefully. "Thank you for letting us impose on you, Sonya."

"This is probably the last week I can do this kind of thing comfortably." Warned the thief before they could leave her bedroom. "Not that I mind the opportunity to focus on something else while people get settled in here, but next week is entirely a bad time for anything. Probably even the entire month too."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Nilda followed the older Italian out, wondering just what the Russian's hitman was up to that might prevent him from taking up her 'availability' as he'd been so obsessed with doing lately. Going across the world just to watch Sonya lecture a bunch of American thugs was fine, checking up on her new residence before handling his own business was equally so, but attending their godchild's end-of-school affair wasn't?

...strange.

(Monday the 25th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Mingxia-"

"You should not be cleaning your own home, Miss Bazanova. Not when there are people to do it for you." Tiny and opinionated little Asian Rain girl with the wine-red eyes insisted to Sonya's face, couching her shoulders then turning her body away as if that would prevent the older thief from taking back her broom to finish sweeping up the ground floor hallways with. "I can clean, you have better things to do."

Her little sister's entirely flat expression spoke volumes of unimpressed with either the argument or actions, or both, and Tatiana smothered her snickers into a palm. "You just need to learn Japanese and do well in school. Not clean my motherfucking castle."

"I've been looking forward to this showdown." Galina informed her quietly, as to not take away from anyone's full appreciation for the ongoing difference of opinion.

"The girl is really opinionated, then?"

"I would've said no two weeks ago... but then I actually spent time with her outside the school and away from being student and teacher." Admitted the Lightning, turning away from the mini-
confrontation going down to face the Sun instead. "Now? She a very opinionated little snot, but not more so than any other girl would be in her position. Very aware of how much she can't afford to lose her position, and that it's not entirely on her own merit just yet."

"I didn't entirely get the whole story behind the 'Chinese pair'." She admitted leadingly.

"Ask your sister." The brunette grimaced, then huffed. "I'd normally just tell you, but I've been out of touch for a while and I rather like my spot as her 'go-to' woman for logistical problems. I don't think she will avoid telling you, but better be safe than sorry and all that bullshit."

Tatiana hummed, caught herself doing Lisa's favored trick to get her foster daughters to spill more information on demand, and cleared her throat embarrassedly before her old friend could bitchily arch an eyebrow at her for doing it. "So. You, me, the beach, and a bit of whichever booze we can get ahold of?"

The Lightning blinked slowly. "What happened, and how bad is it?"

"I think Nya's got a store of vodka somewhere, at least I heard her offer some a few days ago. I could probably find it..."

"That bad?" Galina looked to the hallway entrance to the dining hall where Sonya was trying to glare a stubborn Rain into submission, to the rest of the room where people were either eating on or watching the show themselves, then back to the nurse. "I'll do the rounds of meet-and-greet-then-sort if Sonya's been neglecting it the last few apparently busy days, you find the liquor?"

"Meet me back here in an hour." Agreed Tatiana, glanced at her sister's back, then to the rest of the people trying to fill out a rather large room. "Maybe two."

"Maybe three. Or aim for around lunch." She amended back, glancing at the two late-risers just walking in around the two females taking up the bulk of the hallway space.

Verde appeared entirely unrepentant at the exasperated look Adrik shot him, but Peter McScruffy flushed slightly and edged his way around the disapproving lamed thief in aims of getting to the somewhat vastly reduced buffet table of breakfast foods set on the two closest table to the kitchen. Galina's fellow Lightning merely accepted a mug of black coffee from the same Russian and apparently ignored whatever her old gang-member tried to lecture him about, and not in favor of something to eat.

"...how about after lunch?" She suggested to her tablemate sheepishly. "$I've been meaning to talk to Adrik for a few days now, about not-medical things, but Nya just got a lot of visitors all of a sudden and that was distracting as hell..."

"Which hasn't have a damn thing to do with a particular Lightning Guardian from 'Vongola', then?"

"Tiny bit." Avoided the nurse, badly. Yes, new boyfriend was a topic she didn't particularly want to discuss with anyone else just yet... at least until she figured out what the hell she really wanted from that, but that was also a little close to the topic she wanted to inform the other woman of once they had some cover and enough anonymity to preserve her image if necessary. "There's an ice-cream store on the boardwalk-boulevard thing, well 'gelato' but same difference. We'll hit up that before coming back."

The Lightning sighed heavily through her nose. "Really bad news then..."

"In a way. More important for any children you might have in the future, but tiny bit to check with you and your understanding of your nature before telling my mom about this."
Galina studied her and her expression for a long moment, then slowly nodded. "Right, I'll start with those I know for a fact might not have said something if Sonya ever asked. Then when you get the liquor just come get me, everyone aside maybe two can be left for another day."

"...thanks 'Lina."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 25th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Yaozu presented himself to his mildly illegal benefactor just before the midday meal two days after moving to her new residential location, who was taking advantage of a quiet corner to practice some crafts work with knitting needles. "I aim to open another dojo. I ask you for help establishing it, as I am likely to need a local building to teach students."

"Criminal or non-criminally connected?" Inquired the Russian idly without looking up, somewhat clumsily attempting to fall into a rhythm with her shiny silver needles but that effort was ruined by frequent pauses a novice needed to be sure their work was at least following a general pattern.

…that was a question he had not really come to a decision on.

The bowed blonde head raised up slowly, and level grey eyes gave him a pointedly inquiring glance. "The last we spoke, I believe you were fundamentally against any kind of student with connections even remotely shady. Honestly, I expected you to flatly refuse the first suggestion."

"I remain so." Yaozu informed her firmly, then hesitated with an irritable frown. "At least… no. I have my tenets, my morals still. You may all not be as dishonorable as I had once assumed, but I still cannot risk teaching those intending to make their way among you the skills to break another with."

"...fair enough." She dismissed easily enough, with a roll of one shoulder. "Civilians need to know how to defend themselves too."

"That is my current issue. Not all of you are equally as fine with your lifestyle as most." Fong's sister, her brother, the still thin Sun remanded to his teachings to help his recovery, just to name a few key examples. He tightened his arms, now holding the opposite elbow in each palm instead of leaving his hands on his forearms within his sleeves, before continuing when the woman didn't return to her knitting. "How do I tell those that desire to misuse my art from those seeking the assurance knowing how to defend themselves from the same apart?"

He would've just thrown them out for abusing his tenets that way, before. Now… now he knew slightly better than to assume they all would do the same things as another would.

"You could ask one of the Mists, it would take a significant effort to hide from Usov if you do not feel right asking the Mirror Lady to check into your prospective students. Any way you do it, it's still a massive violation of privacy." Allowed the thief bluntly, finally looking back down to her lap and the apparently unsatisfactory progress she had made before this conversation. "I could do it, but I might not have the time. Galina can certainly check for you… Adrik should stay close to the castle for the time being until Tats decides he's healthy enough. Cesare might be able and willing but I'm not sure what kind of information he could get you and he's not really 'mine' as the rest of the people here are, so you'd have to pay for that yourself. Verde, not so much in any category. He's another like Cherep where he could do the whole nine-yards if he had to, but it wouldn't really suit him much and he has a better time of it being a supporting contact at best. He might benefit from learning the same art Peter is, if you would not mind. Hawk… might be able to. We don't really know yet."
As he was really asking her to finance and 'manage' the criminal influences so he could legally own and operate a school again, he tucked away that comment as the request it probably was to look into later.

Yaozu did not mind being young Mingxia’s guardian for her schooling needs, he practically helped Fong raise the girl from a young age until they left to handle their 'Dying Will' abilities as safely as possible, and he was proud of her for finding a different way. Enabled by her brother and this woman or not, it had to be her to suggest or want a more respectable life for herself in spite of the role models she had to see.

Sitting around with nothing to do, unable to look for more students with an impending move in the future and simply adjusting to Moscow’s general feel left him little time to attempt anything, bothered him more than knowing some ranks of criminals would know he worked at least with if not for her. He was not made for lengthy, month's long periods of simply residing in one place.

The few students he did have, both Peter and her brother Cherep, were spaced too far apart and took up little time in his day. However, he was glad for the normalcy while so far from home.

Another, even one more, would be appreciated. "I recall a nameless man you sent me to take a measure of, who I have seen here as well. I take it he has acquired a new name and is not this 'Verde'?"

"You can't miss Verde, he's as green as his name. Entirely. Hawk is the man you saw before. Not sure if he has a 'surname' yet or what."

"What is the story behind him?"

"No one knows." Without even looking up for the confusion likely on his face, while not a lot was said during that day he had not expected the reason for the testing an inability to recall any formal training instead of just being of an unknown quality needing clarification, she continued. "Not even him."

That... shed a bit more light on a few lingering standouts from that incident. "He was not formally trained, at least not in a style I recognize. His muscles know the proper way to disarm and evade an attacker, however if he does not that would account for some of the disconnect I saw in him..."

"Why are you telling me?" Sonya inquired blankly, looking at him in a puzzled fashion now instead of just blandly accepting of his decision.

"...I did not know he was seeking himself, instead of you merely ensuring he was skilled in the basics enough to suit your needs."

She stared at him for a long moment. "That does not explain why you're telling me."

"Did you not wish to know?"

"I wanted to know if we dropped something near him if he'd try to pull a weapon or attack someone, if he wanted something from that you'd still have to ask him." Disavowed the woman simply, deciding to halt her work and unravel the thin string she was attempting to knit together fully for another attempt. "So, no. Actually, I don't care to know. Hawk needs to figure out what he is before I will be interested, to piece what little he can from what he has left or forge himself anew as best he can."

"Why... do you not use the 'Mists' around here to look, if such is possible? With his permission, of course-"
"We did. The Mists that fucked Hawk over left nothing behind, not even the strongest Mist I know of in the world could find more than just his Dying Will Flame type. Hawk is literally a new-born person, and of course he's already a pain in the ass and argumentative as all Storms tend to be."

Sonya gathered together her knitting implements and supplies into her arms and rose to her feet, then gave him her full attention. "So, a building to own or rent a space for a dojo, in town I expect? Any features it must have?"

"A wall of mirrors." Admitted Yaozu firmly, as that was an aid he did not think he could do without at his age. Had he been younger, he would have refused everything except the building… and insisted to eventually pay the woman back for even that much.

As an old man, he did not have the energy to constantly be everywhere. At least until he trained up senior students again, to help him control unruly beginners and give more personal attention to those needing direct assistance, he would need the reflective surface to give proper attention to those seeking his expertise.

"You do not want to own it?"

"...I fear that may be a waste of your effort. I am not a young man anymore. However, I chafe at not teaching students as I have dedicated my life to."

The suddenly very intent expression he was pinned with was unusual for their interactions and took him off guard. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I am sixty-eight years old." He informed her equally as bluntly as it seemed she preferred to be. "I may not have the time to put into buying a dojo from you or anyone else, or I might only reach that at the very end of my lifetime."

"Then why not?" She countered with some measure of exasperation. "It would be at least one last accomplishment to finish out with. Who fucking cares about 'what if's? Going quietly should be the rudest fucking thing in existence to someone that actually lives out their damned life, and fuck knows there's at least two people that would resent that kind of shit. If you even half-finish the whole 'buy it' thing, you can leave it to Fong and he can finally get a bloody clue how to fucking be helpful when someone asks him to teach something!"

The vehemence from this individual was rather surprising, but he had already adjusted when she suddenly grew concerned over his health from one absently spoken admission. "...I take it you have lost an elderly mentor yourself, then."

All the emotion that was in her suddenly flattened out, leaving behind the brash woman's customary blankness. Which very much was a mask of long-forced indifference, a thick one he could only glimpse around the edges of unless she was aiming to block something out.

"I will take your council to heart," because Yaozu was getting fond of the idea of leaving his most troublesome student a dojo in a far land in revenge, and to likely unsubtly point at a better way of life he could still grasp if he found a need for it, mostly in return for the headache he dropped on him so late in his life, "you have my sorrow for dredging your regrets about your mentor up to the surface of your thoughts."

She looked away from him for a long moment, which did nothing for the glassy sheen in her grey eyes that would not fade no matter how often she blinked. "Right, okay. Talk to Afanasii about locations or spaces available for what you want, Bjorn once you find something, and Maximillian about whatever furnishings or whatever. Ussov when you open, only if you want to be sure of the character of your students."
Impressively level tone of voice, for all it seemed her emotions were trying their best to overcome her control.

The elderly martial arts master gave her a half-bow and left her, so she would not have to hide her sudden bout of grief from prying eyes.

Apparently, the situation back in China had affected him far more than he thought. It should not take a foreign woman's regrets to remind him it was the journey, not the destination, that was more important in the end.

Yaozu had a fair few things to do, to ensure if he remanded his next dojo to his troublesome student's care that the Storm would not simply gift it to a future senior student to care for in turn. Petty revenge wasn't really something he had indulged with at all, but if he was making exceptions for those around him then he could make a few more.

Fēng had been a very sentimental boy, and while Mingxia had learned not to be as much she also enjoyed reminiscing with an old man like him and thoughtful gifts aimed more to be given for their own sake than to help for her possible future schooling or career. He would not build one school to be a pale mockery of what he had been forced to leave behind, but some things would remain similar due to his personality and way of living.

The balance needing to be struck would be between being his home and a place the younger man's little sister enjoyed. Without making it too easy for Fong to turn into a shrine for the dead, or to post a custodian and never return himself.

This last challenge of his life would be interesting to accomplish. Even if he failed, due to factors outside his control, he might still succeed in a way.
Chapter 10

(Tuesday the 26th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"You look like shit."

"Thanks, Nya. Just what I wanted to hear." Tatiana sourly snipped back, heavily slumping to the table and yawning. "Sorry about stealing 'Lina all night."

"I don't honestly care, there was nothing important she had to do just yet." Sonya took another bite of her eggs heaped on a triangle of toast before continuing. "I do appreciate you took a shower before crashing out with me."

"You're a brat." She informed her little sister, giving Cesare a grateful smile for the steaming mug of coffee with a dash of cream he brought her. "And you're fantastic."

"Of course I am." Boasted the murderous chef with a faux sniff of superiority. "Lovely Bossy Dragoness, I've already arranged to cover a three-day break with the equally lovely Ruslana, but just so you're aware..."

"Have fun."

The Italian, amusingly, purred a little chuckle before sauntering off in search of something back in the kitchen.

"So, Shamal's graduation is Thursday and not the start of the weekend..."

"Can I come?" Inquired the nurse curiously as she lowered her mug, earning herself a grateful smile from her baby sister.

"You can. We need to leave around lunch just to make it down there in decent time, and this is assuming Italy does overnight trains so really pack a bag and meet me in the foyer in a few hours. I've got a few last orders to give, then we'll go grab my brat."

"For what?"

"Shamal's got a basic bed and dresser already, but the whole reason this was the castle Bjorn picked over the others was because there's a stable out by the front gates. Brat wants horses, and while I think that'll be fine for getting around the property in decent time... I'm not entirely sure where to get them around here."

Tatiana stared at her little sister over her mug, then blinked slowly when all she got back was an inquiring expression. "...horses."

"...yes?"

"Can you adopt me? I want a pony too."

Sonya stared at her hard. "What the actual fuck, Tats?"

"Oh come on! I'll be a good daughter, very respectful and everything. I've got references!" Lisa might just find it amusing, or exasperating.
"You're weird." She announced flatly, stacking her empty dishes on top of each other to take to the kitchen.

Tatiana spared a moment of thought for getting down something nice and greasy to counter all the acidic alcohol she downed last night but discarded the idea. If they were going out, then there were going to be uncountable little cute cafes here or there to grab a quick bite. Or seven, given her caloric needs.

She wanted to do quite a few things, but Galina would not be up to talking about personal issues for another few days and Adrik probably had as much encouragement and information as he could stomach for as long.

Next week she had to get down to business in checkups, but Sonya promised her some medical supplies and disposable equipment before that could happen.

Getting up too, and immediately swinging back around for her mug of coffee, the nurse tracked down the assassin-chef of the kitchen. "Cesare! Can you fry me up something decently filling and slap it between two slices of bread to go?"

"Lovely and busty, I can do you one better." Insisted the Italian, apparently just putting on the finishing touches for something very similar to eggs benedict Ruslana had been tending for him. The whole affair was placed into a bun of what seemed to be potato bread, the hollandaise sauce slathered on top before being handed over to her.

"Oh... oh, damn. And I have a boyfriend, so I can't ask you to run away with me." Now she had something hot and heavenly in her hands she could actually feel her appetite return.

Cesare snorted, still grinning with good humor as he leaned back against his side of the kitchen's counters. "I shall take that as my due accolades, lovely."

"You're pretty good at picking out what to make for whom..." Tatiana started leadingly, nibbling a bit of sauce off her thumb before it could drip into her palm.

"It's almost too predictable." He dismissed, waving a hand around. "The Lovely Bossy Dragoness is simple. Eggs and bacon or some other breakfast meat, buttered toast and a plain bagel only if she feels the need. If she gets up to something interesting the evening before, oatmeal or a porridge and possibly a touch of fruit. She doesn't like runny eggs, so no sunny side up or over easy for her. No mushrooms, no tomatoes. We can have that ready and waiting within fifteen minutes. Ruslana and her delightful hubby are of a similar mind, although the 'Misty' parents differ in what they appreciate for breakfast. More porridge and less meat, but they are at least making some use of my considerable skills here or there on a rare meal. You, Adrik, and Hawk are all a lot more interesting to cook for."

Tatiana had to hum a few seconds, to swallow down her second bite of the very tasty portable meal she had meant to eat on her way up the stairs. "What of Verde and Scruffy? The new Chinese pair?"

"I've yet to hit on a good measure on the delightful young lady Mingxia, she just wants to wash the dishes instead of inform me what she would like to eat. The elderly man, now he is too wary of me to eat anything I expressly make. Verde almost never eats unless repeatedly reminded. I've been keeping an eye on the man and telling your long-suffering Adrik when and if he skips a meal as 'not important'."

Holding up a finger, which she then immediately popped into a mouth to clean off, the nurse silently begged for a few more moments. "That's more to do with his nature, probably. Lightings realize
they're hungry when they get so, but unless they deal with it that very moment it can be shoved aside as other things come to their attentions and 'forgotten' about. It's probably long-standing habit, but it's a bad one to have."

Nodding his appreciation for her clarification, the chef continued reporting everyone's breakfast dietary preferences to her as he turned around and started in on another dish. "Adrik can order some very interesting items now and again, but usually only on the weekends. Hawk is just interested in tasting one of everything I can make, which I will admit is a lovely distraction to work through. Scruffy... ah, now Peter is interesting..."

Expertly cracking eggs against a bowl waiting to catch the liquids, she couldn't even manage that much as she kept breaking the shells into what she was trying to cook, Cesare flicked the empty shell halves into the little bin waiting at the end of his bank of counters without looking away from his heating pan.

"Peter occasionally asks about what I know of Maghreb cuisine, and unfortunately there's no local place to acquire some of the spices I would need for it. Phyllo is also rather labor intensive, I'm afraid, and so close to France the preference is for pâte feuilletée instead. Too much butter for what he or I would like in a pastille. Which continues a trend into the rest of the dishes I know how to make, either some of it must be prepared the previous day or done for a communal pot affair to be good." He hummed a little, fetching out a tin egg mold out of the sink and placing it in his pan before pouring in the eggs. "Shakshouka is thankfully easy enough to make him for breakfast, about once every four days. He appreciates it greatly."

"What's sha-ksh-whatever?"

"Eggs poached in a sauce made of tomatoes, chili peppers, onions, and some cumin."

"Ooh... that sounds tasty." Looking back at the half-finished sandwich, she studied his back. "Can you make me a bit? I've got to go pack, then when you get back bambino will be here."

"I've fed a Sun Flame user before, lovely and busty. I am just not as sure when it comes to the rest of your rainbow." Cesare informed her matter of factly, waving a spatula over a shoulder at her. "I won't think less of you eating your fill as you need, just let me know what hits the spot."

"...are you sure you don't want to run away with me?" Ganauche needed to learn to cook or something, otherwise Tatiana would put some serious thought into getting her baby sister's chef to run off with her. The food alone would be worth damn near anything.

The assassin barked a laugh, nipping a few halves of a muffin out of the toaster to plate up with his eggs and a little bit of ham. "Off you go, my dear. Before I get tempted with such lovely flattery."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 26th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

The second move in a year left Mingxia even further from home and a tiny bit lost.

China was no longer just an uncomfortable distance to the southeast, everything from the streets to the climate was different yet again, and while she still had Master Yaozu and some of the people she came to know in the Moscow School number three-zero-five-four... there were even more important and distinctly different people here at Miss Sonya's Italian home.
She didn't even have schoolwork to keep her mind off things, they would not know what blanks she still needed to fill in or study harder for the next level of school until her testing scores were sent in. Those might just end up in her brother's hands before hers, and she would never mind Fong checking up on her… she was a little afraid of how badly she might've done.

The beds were too big, she had one room of many in another large building shared with others, she was pretty sure that Miss Anna's pet spider had been scurrying outside her door last night, and if she thought too much about her new situation Mingxia was afraid she'd start crying.

She wasn't adventurous and brave at heart, and while she liked speaking with others she preferred talking to those she knew well. However badly her brother attempted to reassure her traveling would become less scary the more she did it, the Rain did not feel as if she was made to traverse distant lands comfortably.

Two sensible brown leather shoes edged into her view, and startled she looked up to the mother of Larion the Rain. "Mrs… Tolmachyova?"

The older Russian woman hitched up her skirts and knelt down to help her scrub the cool marble of the ground floor's main hallway. "Hello, Miss Sōng. You looked just a tiny bit miserable over here all alone, so I was wondering if you'd like to talk."

"…oh, but Mrs. Tolmachyova! You shouldn't-"

"Young lady, I have been appointed the head of household for the time being. Miss Bazanova will allow you to run her off chores because if you would like to do it instead then she will not stop you, but I am responsible for keeping the castle clean and functional." With a gentle smile to take any sting out of her rebuke, the mother of a fellow Rain took up on of the sponges she had nearby incase the one she was using became too dirty. "I appreciate your care, but in this it is misplaced. I should be insisting you do not have to clean up after us, and that you have better things to do."

Mingxia rung her hands together, a tiny bit disturbed by that suggestion. "…I would not know what to do with myself if you did."

"I will not insist, then. But, may I suggest practicing your Italian? Exploring the nearby town for anything, like where to get more school supplies? Finding a few textbooks you and the others might need with Hawk? You will not be the only student living here, and my husband would appreciate the help in finding the proper stores to frequent." Dunking her sponge to get the dirt off, the older woman kept on scrubbing until she slowly joined her. "You could also gather the other children and find a school yourselves, although that will require a day set aside for it. You will have to go to another town for your education, as the closest schools for the age range you youngsters are is in Trigoso."

Oh, she should've thought of that herself. Mingxia knew perfectly well she had a poor understanding of science and history, and there were bookshelves upon bookshelves lining the floors of the castle. Surely she might be able to find something to study more within one or two, or she could ask the Sunny McScruffy and the Lightning Miss Galina for more work.

"Miss Sōng, I did not suggest that to make you feel worse."

"But you're right. There are things I should be doing, instead of feel scared and alone."

Surprisingly, the older woman laughed. "We are all alone. A little section of outsiders and misfits in the middle of Italy, not all Russian and not all criminals. It is alright to feel that way, because we are. I am sure you have your reason for being here, just like each and every one of us."
"Miss Sonya only gave me the opportunity to study law, I have to make something of it to gain what I wanted."

"She didn't have to take my family with her but did because my son asked her to." The greenette confessed as well, scrubbing a bit harder at a scuff mark in the pretty patterned stone under their hands and knees. "I do not think she will mind if you need a few days to adjust to a new place as she's still doing it herself, you know."

No, she hadn't known. The blonde had looked as passive as always when picking them up from the airport, glancing over each of them in turn before silently showing them the way to the train line and how to get to her castle. "Really?"

"It's a little hard to catch, you have to look at her when she gets pensive to see what she really thinks." Admitted Larion's mom easily with a slight sigh, leaning back on her heels to check what they had gotten done against what was still left to do. "I think she feels a bit lost and bewildered herself. Sonya seems also a little overwhelmed at the size of this place, she keeps ending up in odd little corners out of the way to do whatever she deems to do every day instead of with everyone else on whatever room we're working on. Even if it's just read a book, she'll end up on the fourth-floor landing or in the third floor's back hallway instead of the few places we actually have seating in."

Mingxia, weirdly, felt a little bit better to hear her benefactor seemed to feel the same way she did. "Unless she specifically picks to be in the way. Like the last few days and her guests." Amended the older woman thoughtfully, turning a little to face her instead of bend back to work. "I honestly came to see you and your elderly gentleman to see if we're waiting on any packages for you, at first. I should probably ask now before I get carried away."

"Oh, no. We have everything." That they took along from China, that is. She was sure Master Yaozu missed a few of his treasured belongings, given to him from former masters and students alike, but would make due instead of bother someone about his missing things. She had very little to her name, and most was bought in Moscow with Miss Galina to fit her for a Russian winter.

"Already? You didn't exactly arrive with much, Miss Sōng."

"We moved to Moscow the year before, and actually I think we have a little too much to be honest." Like the bed. It was comfortable, to be sure... but too big for just her.

The whole room she was assigned to was too big for her, she dearly missed her old room in the Wo Hop To Triad headquarters’ building. It was small, but cozy.

She raised an eyebrow at her. "How many changes of clothing do you have? For this weather, I mean. I'm aware any of your winter-weight clothing will not be suitable here."

"...three?"

"...right. Go fetch your elderly gentleman. We're going shopping." Decided Mrs. Tolmachyova firmly, using the banister of the main floor's staircases to get back to her feet and tossing the sponge in her other hand to the dirty water bucket. "Laundry day is Saturday, you need at least one outfit per day to wear. More just in case, preferably. Two weeks' worth of clothing would be preferable, but I will content myself with just the one."

"But Mrs. Tolmachyova! I don't have that kind of money-"

"There is a fund set aside for any emergency, like buying clothing or hygiene needs that we might need while relocating for Miss Bazanova." She informed her, unmoved by her protest. "And, as a
young lady, you require some."

Mingxia blinked up at her, confused. "Why? I have not yet… ah… 'blossomed'."

The older woman looked unimpressed with her point as she held out a hand to help her to her own feet. "And that means when you do, you might ruin what you're wearing that day. Which reinforces my point you need more clothing, dear. Quickly. Something to work in if you need to do something messy like cleaning, which you might as well use the worse of your older clothing for, at least five somethings for school, a good dress for important occasions, and at least two more outfits to mix and match with as need or just in case. Maybe just a few things you think are cute, because every girl needs a good cute outfit to help them feel nice on blue days."

"…now?"

"Now."

"I'll go see if Master Yaozu is available."

A smirk curled up one side of Mrs. Tolmachyova's mouth. "Let me know if he isn't. If so you, I, and maybe Zinaida will go shopping instead. We'll also be sure to pick him out the most garish, brightly colored monstrosity we can."

The young Rain took that as the threat it was and started vaulting up the staircases to see if the elderly man could spare her a few hours to avoid that. Fourteen outfits were way too much for her, when she already had four of a type that was too heavy to be comfortable here in, but if it was to spare the old master some embarrassment she would accept it.

(Thursday the 28th of May, 1970. Convitto Nazionale Tommaso Campanella, Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"Mamma!" Shamal stumbled to a bit of an awkward halt just in front of her but Sonya didn't really want him to restrain himself for anything as paltry as another's opinion, so she hugged him. "You and Zia made it!"

"Of course we did, bambino." Tatiana informed him snootily, sniffing in faked insult. "We're in the country, why wouldn't we?"

As this was a civilian-heavy area, the auditorium of a school was not the place to start doing things only inhumanly possible, she didn't pull her brat off his feet to hold even if she wanted to and instead reluctantly let him go to see him in the garish fluorescent lighting. "You almost ready to move in with me?"

"Yes!" She got another extra strong hug before the young Mist swapped women to then hug his aunt, so the younger Russian glanced around the slowly filling auditorium as she rose back to her full height.

There was a completely civilian teacher nervously hovering on his toes, apparently having been a breath away from corralling his errant student before it became obvious there was a familiar relation between them. Much to her moderate surprise, there wasn't any criminals lying in wait for her here.

Not even Renato. There were a few shifty individuals, but they seemed to have their own brats to tend to and not here expressly to bother her. None of whom she recognized even remotely.
Then again, she had to go to the Iron Fort to pick up the brat's things. Why interrupt a civilian run
affair needlessly when she had to go to them in the end anyways?

Pursing her lips to hide her sudden frown, Sonya returned her attention to her godson. "So, is there
any reason your first graduation was on a weekend and this one is near the middle of the week?"

"Those in their first year and those graduating from the school for the last time get the weekends,"
Shamal informed her helpfully, winding his still tiny hands into her skirts. "I'm no longer special,
having done a year."

"Well, it's your last year here. You should say goodbye while you can." She warned, earning herself
a shrug. "Or not?"

"There's no one I really like here." Bratty Mist insisted, giving Tatiana a smile for offering her hand
as she didn't have skirts to hold. "Not as much as I like you, mamma."

"Aww… you're a total momma's boy." Teased the nurse, laughing when the brat gave her a strange
look instead of getting huffy. "And entirely shameless. Good. So, what do we do for this shindig?
I've never attended any school graduation before."

"You have to sit out here, and I have to go stand with my class behind the teachers on stage."
Shamal took a look around himself, at his waist-high view of the world, before looking back up to
the older Russian sister. "There'll be a lot of talking, and speeches, and then we can go either see the
school projects we did all year or leave."

"Right, boring as fuck but yay you." She blinked innocently at the short look her baby sister tossed
her. "What?"

"There are young children here, stop swearing." At the entirely unimpressed glance between her and
Shamal, Sonya rolled her eyes. "Not all of them will be as mature as my brat to know there's a time
and a place."

The feedback from someone tapping on a microphone made all three of them wince, and the brat
very reluctantly let them go as there was a rush for good seats all around them. "I should get back to
my class, mamma."

"Alright. Hurry up, and we might as well go get something sweet after this." She offered, mildly
amused at the idea of anyone attempting to speak to her after she got to the Iron Fort needing to wait
on them.

She could be wrong, but given how unexpectedly popular she had been the last week she kind of
doubted Nono would pass up the privacy to piss her off yet again. Especially if he didn't listen to Tyr
about her opinion on the 'offer' he wanted to sound out to her.

Was that where Renato was?

If so, she really didn't appreciate it.

Tatiana at least waited until the whole dog and pony show started, and they were seated on the end
of one of the auditorium seat isles, to ask. "Why are we going for sweets after this? I thought you
were looking forward to getting your brat into your place?"

"Renato's not here, and given the general gossip Tyr and Mrs. Silvery-White gave me… I kind of
suspect where he's being held up at."
"Were you expecting tall, dark, and snarky?"

"He usually is the one to tell me when these things are and didn't say he'd miss it when he swung by a bit before you to introduce me to Cesare." There was always the possibility the hitman just couldn't get the space to do it, and that it was a last-minute change he couldn't pass word on for.

Well, she'd see what was going on in a few hours.

The nurse huffed suspiciously, but let the topic drop at least for the moment.

Given Tatiana probably wanted to go jump her boyfriend, Sonya actually really appreciated that she'd follow her lead in this. It also made the thief curious on how her older sister would navigate being the girlfriend of Timoteo's Lightning Guardian, and all the pitfalls within being either neutral or disapproving of the Sky himself as a separate entity than just as Ganauche's Sky.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 28th of May, 1970 continued. Vibo Valentia, Province of Vibo Valentia, Italian Republic.)

The coffee flavored gelato got about a quarter of the way melted before Renato did in fact show up, snatching up the small paper cup waiting for him and throwing himself heavily into the remaining open café chair. "I can't decide if I'm more irritated or annoyed."

"I take it Nono did have you delayed, then?" Sonya inquired silkily, having long since finished her modest sized treat and taking up her nasty habit of smoking to wait out her and Shamal's bigger portions of the dessert. "When you had other commitments, as well..."

Tatiana exchanged a faintly curious and mildly lost look with the little boy, who didn't seem to know what was going on at all.

"Not exactly. I was late, little dragon lady. Excessively so, I'm afraid. I called your place, your Galina told me you already left so I didn't rush through my delays like a greenhorn idiot. That was before I got into town." Corrected the hitman, savoring a bit of his gelato before glancing across the tiny table at her nephew and his godson. "I told Shamal I might miss his thing last week, when I realized what was going on. I figured he'd pass that tidbit to you if I was."

"You two are lucky I thought about it and realized I might have to be on time myself this year."

"And we're both surprised you managed it." Tall, dark, and snarky yanked his knee away before Sonya could flick the remnants of her vanilla gelato off her spoon and onto his nice black suit. "And we both really appreciate it, little dragon lady."

"That doesn't exactly explain why you weren't waiting for us to get out." She countered through the lingering smoke of her cigarette, still annoyed enough to show it. "I get he's really powerful and all, but there should be limits. Even for you, being that you worked really hard not to be tied down to him."

The darker Sun sighed, half still annoyed and a touch more exasperated. "I had him shelter Shamal in his own home, little dragon lady. However much you don't like him, I do. If only for that alone. The brat's fine and healthy, I do kind of owe him that. We owe him that much."

"Exactly how far do you think that stretches? I did appreciate it, slightly for although it should've been avoided the brat still got sick from a known complication with that kind of healing, right on up until he slighted my mother and tried to entrap me into a lethal loophole disguised as an 'offer'."
Renato's eyes widened, but before he or she could ask someone else joined the conversation.

"Oi, asshole! You couldn't wait for me to find a place to park?" Ganauche demanded irritably, lighting up slightly when his lone eye landed on her. "Tatiana! I didn't know you were the other woman Miss Bazanova was sighted with."

"Your security forces out here need some work." Drawled the nurse, only a touch sarcastically, smirking slightly as the Lightning rounded the whole party to give her a hug. "But yes. Surprise. Now, what's this about your Nono slighting our mom?"

Amusingly, the man froze. Completely, like a block of ice. "...uh... what?"

"I retired from being a principal. In our mother's favor." Sonya announced with lethal patience edging her tone, pinning the agent of the man who apparently didn't think much of Lisa with a pointed look. "Which means I am her unassigned Home Tutor, unless she finds a student that requires the help and until she decides she has more than enough for our old stomping grounds."

"...you put Lisa in charge of a-" Cutting himself off, her fellow Sun started smirking. "Oh, that's evil. I love it."

The now vastly confused Ganauche glanced down at her, tilting his head a little like a puppy to account for his reduced field of view. "I take it 'Lisa' is your mom then?"

"Primakova Elisaveta Rostislavovna, but we do call her Lisa yes." Tatiana confirmed, swallowing her last spoonful of gelato and tossing the paper cup with the little plastic spoon into the trash before turning in her seat to help reduce the eyestrain he was probably causing himself. "Not the important part, Ganauche."

"...can I make a phone call or two?" Inquired the other Mafioso hastily, looking a touch nervous now as he really absorbed that tiny fact of the situation. "Because we didn't know. At all."

"Go right ahead." Sonya allowed magnanimously, with a razor thin smirk. "The brat's not done eating yet."

She did at least wait until her boyfriend dashed off to turn to her. "Five kopecks he's calling the island to call off something stupid with the medical students."

"No bet." Tatiana refuted, slightly annoyed as well a tiny bit irritated by the suggestion. Those were her minions, damn it all, and that was her fucking boyfriend. What the hell?

Well, they'd be Avdotya's for this year. But they had been hers and would be again when they traded off the school year after this one.

Renato put a big spoonful of his coffee flavored and half-melted gelato into his mouth instead of answer with his own guess when Sonya arched an eyebrow at him.

Shamal curiously took in the extra-large helping his godmother bought for him he had made a respectable dent in, then squinted an eye up at her suspiciously. "Should I eat this fast or slow, mamma?"

"However you want to go, kotenok." Purred the thief around the filter of her cigarette, the nasty smirk on her face widening when her fellow godparent couldn't respond due to a full mouth and the other Mafioso too far away to hear. "Take your time, by all means. I'm sure I can think up more to delay with."
"Little dragon lady…"

"No one has formally invited me to a discussion or meeting, or anything of that persuasion." Insisted her very bitchy little sister pointedly, not even giving the man the courtesy of even a sideways glance as she put out the remains of her cancer stick. "As a matter of fact, once Shamal's done we might as well get him to my home. I figure you can grab his things just as well, and... it'd be rude to call uninvited so late into the evening on someone of Nono's reputation and power. Just for a few, likely outgrown, changes of clothing and a lizard I believe should be remanded to your possession anyways? I think not. They can be shipped by mail if need be."

"She's been like this since I got to the country." Tatiana informed the man when he raised an eyebrow at her expectantly. "I have nothing to offer and no method to influence it. Good luck."

"...Ganauche can do it." Decided Renato, settling in to savor the gelato Sonya did buy him. "But you are aware... Nono invited the Italian head of your schooling branch as well as Dante to your meeting with him, right?"

"Well, unfortunately no one told me that I had a meeting pending. I made my plans accordingly." Announced the thief blandly, just in time to send Tatiana's boyfriend scurrying off again before he even got back to them. "Hopefully they won't get too bored."

"I take it this is going to be one of those 'settle in a watch the shit hit the fan' nights, then." Mused tall, dark, and snarky as he discarded the empty paper cup in his hands into the same rubbish bin she tossed hers into. "Too bad I don't think the maids will appreciate it if we asked for popcorn."

The nurse pursed her lips thoughtfully, because she was kind of getting hungry enough to not care that wasn't a healthy suggestion. "Actually... that sounds really good right now. Could we just make excuses of missing dinner?"

"...that's a good point, big sister." Suddenly purred the younger sister wickedly, taking shameless advantage of her suggestion and going the extra mile with it. "We should feed poor Shamal. All he's had tonight is gelato, and really. A growing boy needs a proper meal, doesn't he Renato?"

"It's your turn." Allowed the hitman with a crooked smirk, pressing a hand to his ever-present hat to shade his eyes and half his expression. "I had the brat for almost four years, and frankly you've been paying for most of his needs lately."

"Alright, brat. What would you like to eat?" Inquired Sonya silkily, with a shit-eating grin of her own.

Amusingly, said brat gave her a look. Both slightly exasperated and a little bit tolerant, and a tiny bit more amused and delighted to be playing along with her little game on top of that. "But mamma, Zia wants popcorn."

"Zia can get off her own damn ass and stop mooching off me. I asked what you wanted."

Shamal thought about it, only just long enough for Ganauche to start wandering back from the payphone apparently down the street a little. "Can we get lasagna?"

"Of course, kotenok. You did graduate from your school-thing today." Allowed the belligerent Storm-Cloud almost nauseatingly sweetly, neatening some of the kid's kinked brown hair with her fingers. "And we're all very proud of you for sticking it out then doing well at it. If you want your favorite for dinner, then that's the least we can do to show it."

Tatiana gave her little sister's 'kitten' a thumbs up and a crooked grin, his godfather rolled his eyes,
and Ganauche just face-palmed behind the whole group.

She kind of wondered when Sonya would allow her boyfriend on to the little 'not yet invited' tidbit, and exactly how long after even that her little sister would drag her heels. It was really kind of bullshit no one said anything to them, and because Ganauche wasn't the one calling the shots she'd order him something easy to eat on the way in-between dashing around.

Otherwise she was just going to do the same thing tall, dark, and snarky was. It could even be hilarious, depending.

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya, as Renato didn't chip in anything to put a spike into her plans, dragged her heels up until almost midnight. Shamal was very obviously flagging past ten, being what his body considered a school night and with way too much excitement going on to sleep through, and Tatiana eventually wrangled a promise out of Ganauche to escort her and the brat on up to the castle if she'd just attend the damn meeting already.

She bought an extra hour making a great show of fussing at her tired but still amused brat before he got on the train with his aunt and her harassed boyfriend trying to bolt down his very cold dinner, buying him a blanket off a concerned lady traveler very accommodating to the 'poor harassed mother' trying to make her child as comfortable as can be before being separated due to a last minute 'business meeting' she had to attend.

Amusingly, her sister even got her Italian to pay her back for the trouble to boot.

The last few minutes of Thursday were eaten up because she decided it was a perfect night for a leisurely walk, and by then Renato had just sort of given up even a touch more and didn't even chip in his two kopecks about having a perfectly armored car to drive back to the Iron Fort in.

Eventually, the hitman was going to cause himself some eyestrain rolling his eyes so damn much. Then she might be able to push things back a further three hours or so taking him to the nearest emergency room.

"You've decided to be a belligerent handful tonight, little dragon lady. Why ever would I spoil your fun?" Renato snarked at her without turning around, seeming all for the world perfectly at ease strolling up the grand drive of Vongola's headquarters with her.

"He is your friend, isn't he?" She questioned his back curiously, because if not…?

"Yes, Timoteo's a friendly and powerful contact of a type I would like to keep. That doesn't mean I'm responsible for his actions, any actions by his Famiglia, or the like. I actually had nothing, still have nothing, and will not have anything to say about this. I kind of rather agree with you, however at a loss the man is with his wife so estranged and his sons out of his reach."

"Being 'at a loss' is no excuse for this bullshit, and I'd be a lot more sympathetic if he hadn't caused it himself by lying to her face for more than five years."

Renato gave her a pointed look over a shoulder as the poor footman opened the front doors for them.

"Exactly, little dragon lady. I don't particularly like that much either, but I'm not one of Nono's peers to say something."
"And that's bullshit. I get Ottavia needed near-unquestioning obedience throughout World War Two and the Mafia Wars to pull what she could out of that bloody mess intact," they were inside now, she could be as frank as she liked, "but Timoteo patterned himself off a vastly different leadership style to stand apart from his mother. A councilor type requires outside input, more voices to speak their views to him, automatic obedience of the type Daniella had passed on apparently just reinforces his bad habits."

"I am not going to be passing judgement on a Famiglia I do not belong to." Insisted the hitman as he waited politely for her to divest herself of her weaponry.

"I kind of have to, if only to teach the brat what is and what is not acceptable to put up with in possible allies. Calling up others to a meeting with me without so much as telling me is kind of... utterly stupid. There's more than enough people around him to have known better, and yet...?"

Renato spread his hands in a wordless gesture of non-comment as she coiled her chains and their assorted weapon charms on to the tray being held out for her.

"Miss Bazanova," a very tired appearing Visconti called from the second floor's landing, "you are late."

"For fucking what?" Shot back the Storm-Cloud in a tone that spoke volumes on just how unimpressed she was with him entirely and everything else coming from these people lately. "Your incompetence is not my damn fault, so suck it up. If you wanted me to be on time, then perhaps you should've sent word my presence was desired in the first place."

The other Cloud blinked once, slowly.

In the ringing silence that announcement caused, Sonya looked back to the hitman she had arrived with. "I'm terribly sorry to ask this, Renato, but would you mind waiting for me? Apparently, I have a meeting to attend."

"Shocking." Deadpanned the equally tired looking Sun sarcastically. "I couldn't have guessed myself. Are you sure?"

"Apparently. They had a man waiting for me and everything." She drawled back equally so, because she would've liked to be in bed on a train heading back to her castle now herself. "Why, you would've thought actually telling me I had a meeting with a few other men would've been something to check off before tonight."

Yet again, the man rolled his eyes at her and sauntered off to probably find himself a stiff drink.

...damn. That was an idea. She should've gotten herself one before this mess.

Renato lifted two fingers at her over his shoulder before he got further into the Iron Fort, so maybe he would get her one?

She wondered if there was any of that vodka left from last Christmas, because her sister stole what remained of her stash and she kind of needed more. Surely no one would care if she liberated a little liberation from Vongola's stock?

Did Italians drink vodka?

She didn't think so, given the face Renato pulled at her bottle of it last summer.

Sonya followed the very pissed off other Cloud further into the Iron Fort, palming one of her tiny
hammer charms into the waistband of her skirts.

Again, damn the lack of pockets.

There were in fact three men waiting on her, in various levels of exasperation and irritation. One of which she recognized as Dante D'Attilio, who amusingly had removed his suit jacket and made himself comfortable with a tumbler of whisky some long time ago. Timoteo was still trying to somewhat hold onto his respectability, his tie was gone and the top button of his shirt undone but that was as far as he had gone in altering his mode of dress any.

"You. You little-

"Timoteo, apparently no one informed Miss Bazanova of the meeting." Visconti interrupted loudly, which did nothing for her understanding of what the unnamed man had about said.

"You can go fuck yourself with a rusty chainsaw." Sonya returned politely with a smirk. "I'll even help if you'd like."

Dante, who hadn't bothered to correct himself or even sit upright when she walked in, blinked slowly in the way of the mildly intoxicated everywhere before raising a hand and slapping it against his face. The lone Sky in the room sighed heavily himself almost into the desk he was seated behind, rubbing at a temple. "I… see."

"No, I don’t think you really do." Picked up the thief after a beat of pure silence. "I am not Italian. I do not have Italian contacts to keep me informed. I don't care to have any, given how utterly fucking MORONIC every damn Italian but the ones I originally had in the first place to be. I am not one of your minions, Nono Vongola, nor do I give a bloody damn what you want."

"You give a bloody damn about my wife-"

"Yes… your wife. Who spent three hours chopping away at one of my almond trees to work out how utterly betrayed she felt due to your inactions, sobbed out the rest into my sister's chest, and is still feeling lost and alone enough to take up an offer I gave for a day of drinking even with three sons to mind and whatever Mrs. Silvery-White can give her." Sonya observed tonelessly, eyeing the man with severe dislike. "While you sit here. Doing nothing about it."

The Sky finally gained an edge to him, straightening up and setting his features into something almost razor sharp. "Fiorella should decide for herself-"

"If she should return to the man that outright lied to her damn face for every day of five fucking years of marriage?"

"Miss Bazanova." Thundered the head of the Vongola Famiglia equally as shortly, half-rising to his feet while his Cloud Guardian went stiffer behind her. "Mind your tongue."

"Why?" She inquired deceptively calmly. "What, exactly, would motivate me to do so? You've arranged a meeting with me I was never told about, upon a day I should have spent with my godson as it is his school graduation night. Master Tyr has passed along you intended to name me Fiorella's Mafia Home Tutor, without asking my mother as the head of the Mafia School I am aligned with. And, given the rules I know of and am aware of, such a position would then put me in conflict with Fiorella's eventual influence against what Home Tutors are allowed. To my lethal determent, without consulting the prospective student in question, or even any apparent care for anyone's wellbeing in the inevitable end. What about this mess is anything other than hastily thrown together and the worst possible solution to the current issues?"
"That is what we are here to discuss."

"Lovely that I was never invited, isn't it? And Fiorella, as the one concerned, had to be told by me."

"Daughter, shut up." Lisa announced brightly from behind her in flawless Italian, walking past a highly unnerved footman who apparently led her into the meeting room. "And step back, I would like a piece."

Surprised, and to be honest a little unnerved, Sonya did so.

Lisa wasn't entirely out of place in the drawing room, being more than a little travel worn and a bit exhausted to match the rest of them. Probably to make it down here after Fiorella contacted her, which was probably some red-eye flights and a bit of grease applied by her old contacts. She, vaguely, knew who and for what she contacted to get out of the Soviet Union and into Italy so damn fast… but without Valera?

Was Arseniy nearby too?

Her mother, sensible smart business suit intact with that tight little smirk plastered across her lips which she wore when either her lover was upset or something incredibly annoying was happening, turned her attention onto the discombobulated Sky staring at her blankly. "Timoteo Vongola? I am Primakova Elisaveta, the second head of the Moscow School number Three-Zero-Five-Four… otherwise known as the Soviet Flame Academy. Tatiana and Sonya's mother, if you didn't catch that. I spoke with your wife, and I have a bone to pick with you."

Sonya slid backwards a tiny bit further, pressing her back up against the wood-paneled walls. Visconti, utterly confused and a little wary now instead of getting progressively pissed off the more she spoke, slowly copied her.

Smart man.

"You will not be endangering my daughters with your own foolish mistakes. Young Miss Fiorella and I have discussed it, and we have decided I'll do as the girl's Tutor. You 'concern'," and here Lisa eyed the man as if he was a particularly grotesque cockroach trying to squirm into her pantry, "is not needed nor wanted."

Sonya was perfectly aware she physically blanched, but the thought of a second Lisa kind of warranted it. Don't get her wrong, Fiorella probably deserved a mentor like her mother to make up for her disaster of a husband… but it was still a terrifying thought.

"…Mrs. Primakova-

"Miss. I am not married to my vor." Corrected the older Russian woman pleasantly, utterly at odds with the tight expression still on her face. "Furthermore, if you are attempting a refusal on your wife's behalf, she has already informed me to tell you exactly where to shove it. As the delightful girl put it, 'you had five years to tell me, then a little more. I'll find my own way if it's not that important to you'."

Timoteo hesitated, flatfooted by that admission, which was just long enough for the still unidentified man to try to interject himself into the conversation. "Headmistress Primakova, I'm the head of-

"Go fuck yourself with a rusty chainsaw." Interrupted her mother equally as politely as Sonya told him to do. "Tighten up your own ship before you start trying to interfere with mine."

"…Lisa, the last man on the couch is Dante D'Attilio. The Etiquette Instructor for Mafia School of
How long had she been here?

"A pleasure, young man." Allowed the brunette woman with a one-eighty reversal of mood, getting a twisted grin back and a raise of a half-drained shot glass in salute. "Perhaps tomorrow we can speak on the subject?"

"I like my balls where they are, Headmistress Primakova." Dante refuted dryly, apparently trying his damnedest not to slur his words but listing a little in spite of that. "You have my utter apologies for being remotely involved, but I wasn't aware your daughter didn't know about this."

"You are delightful." Lisa decided, glanced once at the man she shared a position with that neither of them probably knew the name of and huffed sarcastically, then returned her attention to Nono Vongola. "Nothing to say? Good, keep it that way. Goodnight, gentlemen."

"…um, Lisa?"

"You were right to refuse, and I did not agree lightly. As I do not care to live down here, any contacts made in the process of teaching Fiorella Vongola I can then easily give up as a Mafia Home Tutor is supposed to." Gripping her jaw to touch her forehead to her own, her mother smirked crookedly before releasing her and stepping lightly to the door. "And this way that dratted man cannot have you as easily killed in the future by voiding any agreements later. I hope you will not mind letting me stay in your home for some of tonight and tomorrow, Nya. I should probably meet the poor girl in person at least once. I'll be in the main hall downstairs when you're done."

Sonya waited until her mother had truly left before peeling herself away from the wall. "Well… okay then."

"…it is an elegant solution, Nono." Allowed the still unnamed man only a touch sarcastically, turning to the Sky in question after apparently getting over his abrupt dismissal of any importance. "As a completely removed Tutor, a person of particular influence and power in her own right, having Headmistress Primakova teach Lady Fiorella eliminates any need to amend the current restrictions to prevent… unfortunate results. A bit rude, but I suppose I started it with my hasty words."

"I'll fix this, Grizzaffi."

"Fuck you both. He's in the wrong, he should fix 'it.'" Interjected the thief wronged in question blandly. "Just because you started it does not remove his involvement."

Dante drained his shot glass and set it down with a thump. "Headmaster Grizzaffi, I must agree with Miss Bazanov…nova. Nono Vongola, really? Ensuring all parties are agreed to a time and date should not be an after… thought."

Timoteo shot the probably completely drunk Mafioso an utterly exasperated glare, smoothing a hand down his bristly mustache before sighing heavily. "That has become rather apparent, Mister D'Attilio."

"Instructor D'Attilio." Stridently corrected the head of the Italian Mafia School pointedly, turning his ill humor on the man at fault for most of it finally. "As the only one of us that managed any kind of remotely positive introduction with Headmistress Primakova, positively drunk off his ass or not, he will be the one to manage any further assistance your lady wife might require on behalf of Mafia School's resources. Timoteo, I strongly suggest you refer to him with his proper respect."

…so, he was just a tight-ass?
Mister Tight-Ass-Schoolmaster turned to her next. "My apologies, Miss Bazanova. I had, wrongly, assumed you were fully aware of the situation and your invitation."

"I was." Sonya informed him equally as pointedly, then continued before he could even open his mouth. "Of course, I only learned of it while celebrating my godson's second school year graduation about five hours ago. Making you wait on me was my petty revenge for the bullshit."

He stared at her in complete askance, she stared back flatly until he got his act together yet again.

"…probably what we deserved for such boorish behavior." Muttered the man sourly after several long moments. He sniffed and drew himself back up to a ruler-straight 'proper' posture, shot Timoteo a sour look, then swept out of the room haughtily as much as his apparently 'wounded' dignity would allow for.

Dante tried to stand himself, failed and hit the carpeted floorboards with a thump, then sighed into the air. "Miss Bazanova, is Renato downstairs?"

"However could you guess?"

"Because I'm smart, obviously." Drawled the very intoxicated man, proud and almost boasting the point to the nearly empty room. "Think you can help me down to him? I might need someone to help me back home… I don't think I can walk in a straight line…"

"You realize that if I sneeze, I very well might break your spine in half accidently if I'm supporting you?"

"…Master Visconti! A hand, please?"

The Cloud Guardian glanced at her very pointedly.

She very pointedly stayed where she was. There was no way in hell he was the only Guardian nearby, and she still had things to say.

The Sky still in the room sighed in exhausted resignation, a hand over his eyes. "Visconti, if you would. I would like to hear how my Fiorella is doing."

"Recovering." Sonya informed him sarcastically, as his Cloud secured his ever-present sunglasses somewhere they would not fall and break if something unexpected happened before pulling the drunk man to his feet. "Badly. You know, a phone call is not out of the question."

"She must-"

"And what if she decides she's better off without you?"

Timoteo raised his head and stared at her, considering.

Unamused, she cocked her head to the side now they were 'mostly' alone. "Your estranged wife has decided we're friends. Fair enough, then as her friend allow me the leeway to put it this way. The longer you go without contacting her, the more miserable and sure she is that you completely manipulated her just to be a baby-maker and never had any feelings about her personally."

"…what?"

"It's what sense my sister made out of her sobs." She allowed blandly. "And frankly, if that was all you wanted, why the hell didn't you just pay a whore to have your sons instead of twist a poor
civilian girl around your little finger like the complete asshole you-

"I think," Timoteo interrupted shortly, "that is more than enough. I've gotten your point, Miss Bazanova."

"Have you? Because this kind of shit keeps on happening, and now it's completely entangled in my motherfucking family."

"I hear the warning you are giving." Declared the Sky, rubbing a hand over his face. "That does not mean your attitude is acceptable."

"Exactly what gives you the remote impression you have any right to dictate my attitude?"

He opened his mouth, shut it, and that repeated a few times until she no longer found it very amusing.

"The fact you think it's 'attitude' and not me trying my damnedest to not allow my 'Cloud Instincts' to convince me to take your head off and upset several people that are strangely fond of you is telling." Sonya drawled out, half-glaring at the either arrogant asshole or outright ignorant idiot and well aware her eyes were turning a burning red. "Fair warning, Timoteo of Vongola. I'm beyond done putting up with this kind of imposing shit from you. I am not one of your minions, one of your lackeys, nor a yes-man aiming to break off a little bit of your influence because I cannot make my own. The more you try, the more I will erode any kind of respectability you have in front of others. Do not make the mistake in thinking I will be pleased to be chained by you now I finally freed myself from the last syndicate who made that same mistake."

"That is assuming you will not be in need of any help in the future."

"In a contest of who can out manipulate whom, I'd bet on my mother to turn your own wife into a massive pain in your ass for getting me killed before you earn her forgiveness for this lying shit." She pointed out bluntly, wickedly pleased when the man paused at that. "Through her, your sons. Pick your battles carefully, you will not get a second chance."

Timoteo drew himself up. "That would be a massive violation of the."

The Soviet Storm-Cloud leaned in, ignoring the burn of Flames in her eyes itching at them. "Prove it, after you just slighted your head of Mafia School and got him dismissed by my mother at a glance. And no, if she has no contact with your heirs she cannot be held responsible for what their mother passes on to them."

"You believe I cannot?"

"No, you can't. Allow me to be an object lesson, you're burning bridges behind you without realizing it. The fact you have yet to stop is not a good sign, Nono Vongola. How much of your mother's influence are you going to spend thoughtlessly without earning your own? Will you get on that before or after it runs out? Master Tyr cannot cull all your detractors before they gain a foothold somewhere."

Narrowing his eyes at her, the Sky spent a moment with nearly visible gears chugging away in his mind.

"I do not appreciate political gambits and making connections, not of the kind that will take down your incompetent ass. If you force me to do it, none of us will be pleased with the outcome." Sonya warned him softly, before drawing back and turning on a heel to find her mother and Renato to see what their next step would be. "It was utterly awkward and irritating, Timoteo of Vongola. Let's not
do this again."

"...indeed." He tossed at her back, almost sarcastically.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"...pardon?" Daniella inquired politely out of sheer reflex, after her exhausted and slightly drunk son got through spilling his entire feelings about last night's situation to her, her coffee being lowered to the saucer almost unwillingly as she just absorbed the catastrophe of that magnitude.

"Mamman, I-"

"Shut up, Timoteo." Advised the retired Sky tiredly, cradling a fine-boned hand to her forehead instead of taking a sip of her fortifying brew. Thankfully he did so, sheepishly or not.

She had only just got up, and now this disaster... who the hell had she killed to deserve this?

"You very nearly made us into a laughingstock to the rest of the mafia, all because you failed to check with a clerk that Miss Bazanova was informed her presence was desired and asked if she could make such a meeting?" She wondered in near-perfect bemusement, raising her eyes to the ceiling of her parlor. Beseeching patience to come out of nothing, a long-standing habit that never worked as she wished. "Frankly, I would've done almost the same as her. Except I would never had shown and put you out of your misery."

Not needing to look to know what expression her boy was aiming at her, a cross between that sheepishness for doing something so utterly preventable with a word here or there and anger for being called out for it, Daniella gripped one of her couch cushions to lightly smack him across the face with.

Hopefully the shock of it would sober him up a little.

"Timoteo, I know you like to think of yourself as the chess master... but you're playing with an army of pawns and bishops against a woman armed with not only your own queen, but a castle positioned to turn into another queen, three of your own knight-heirs, a rogue of a knight, and possibly one of your own Guardian bishops. Possibly more we likely don't know of. Someone might get lucky, but only after a shit-ton of death and destruction." She fairly itched to meet a woman that could, within three words, get a stubborn and feisty Soviet Storm-Cloud to obey immediately even in the face of her 'target'. But now she couldn't, because her son had threatened the woman's younger daughter and she rightfully probably resented that. "Stop while you've a head and change game-plans, she's too close for you to work against as you prefer."

Dear Tyr should be near her home, she wondered if he had any progress in courting the delightful spitfire or if he had also gotten stumped by her twisted nature crossing between Storm and Cloud at will. Perhaps she might be able to reach Headmistress Primakova somehow if he still was?

At the very least to press on her delight with the 'elegant' solution she had a hand into pulling out of that messy meeting, and a promise of any assistance the older Russian woman may wish for from Vongola's end.

"I know I messed up, mother." Shot back her very unsettled son, handing her back the pillow and drawing himself upright as best he could in the hard-backed settee. "But what she threatened me with."
"Is exactly what I would've not told you and done for the insult, and outright death threat to make it all worse. I like politics, I would've just gone ahead with it all and not pointed it out as a viable method to screw you over so politely. As she is the head of a mafia household, are you remotely surprised she doesn't appreciate you fucking up like this with her? What would you do in her place? Faced with the challenges before her?"

The silence at least informed her it was safe to look back down, that even he had burned through the stupidity that came with exhaustion, thankfully because she was old and there was a crick developing in her neck. Daniella picked up her coffee again, sipping until her son's sometimes ill-used cunning finally resurfaced.

"I would've just had me killed." Timoteo informed her wryly, exhausted and tired enough to be utterly frank to her. "Even if it would upset a new friend who might happen to be married to said individual. To set me up like that, in front of a contact and a fellow head of an influential establishment I also was once a head of? I can see her point, it's just…"

"She's right in a way. You've well and truly burnt that bridge, I don't think even if she was willing you could rebuild that anymore. God probably can't build something on what you left behind. Luckily for you, there's more than just one road to Rome." The girl's sister was getting entangled with young Ganauche, although there were so many double-edges in that situation Daniella didn't know if she liked the development or not. Fiorella, dear girl that she was, had put in better and more effort into pulling the whole Soviet side of that situation into her sphere of influence and getting out unscathed. "I will also chip in my two liras, you should call your wife."

As she had been outright nagging him to do for the last few weeks. A few days, even a full week and a weekend, of space was more than enough. At the very least if he desired to keep his wife he was well beyond the point he should've reached out to her again.

"Beyond your personal marriage problems, Timoteo, there are your sons to think of." She continued practically when there was no answer but an exhausted sigh, because she really did miss the rug rats even if the dear girl he married wouldn't return with them. "Now your Fiorella has options, she is no longer forced to return to deal with the Sky Flame abilities they possess. You cannot be assured she will come back… and there's the little issue of the master thief she is turning into a good friend who has strong Triad influences… who has a mother well removed from any Italian influences you might pull to aid your recovery of them…"

"Mother." Timoteo interrupted shortly. "If Fiorella wishes to return or not, or even speak with me, is entirely her choice. I will not so further hurt her more if I can help it."

"Sweet, but stupid. Write her a damn letter, then. Call your sons instead. Let her know somehow you're still interested in her at the very least, and her fears are misplaced if they really are. You obsess about every detail you can get of her already, to the point you arranged this disaster in the first place. Might as well at least show a little damn effort to her to appreciate or declare objectionable."

Exasperatingly, it seemed that actually might be how her stubborn and willful son would reconnect with his wife. At least he didn't immediately refute it as with the other times she insisted he go to his wife himself or at least call her up.

"…do you think she was right?"

"With what?"

"Am I spending your influence and not my own?"
"You're spending Vongola influence." Daniella corrected with exasperation, having made decent work of her coffee at least to put up with self-doubting without ruthlessly tearing that down. "You'll gain it back, as you should, with your work on the Alliance. Is she right about the 'I needed obedience and you don't'? I have no idea what you're really dealing with behind closed doors anymore. You're the one in power, Timoteo, you need to judge that yourself and shift things accordingly to suit you."

Timoteo rolled his neck, then straightened up and looked at her fully for the first time for the entire conversation. "Do you think I could actually get Headmistress Primakova-"

"Don't even, Timoteo. It was a meeting between two heads of Flame instruction institutions about the instructions of a student however removed from Flames herself. Italian and Russian Flame users were involved, the Vindice were likely present and heard everything."

"…fuck."

The retired Sky poured herself another cup of coffee and settled back to plot. "Fuck, indeed. Now go take a damn shower."
Chapter 11

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970 continued. Roma Termini, Metropolitan City of Rome, Italian Republic.)

Dante's expression when he realized Renato was hauling him off the train along after Lisa was vaguely funny, but Sonya was more interested in how the hell her mother got into the Iron Fort. It had been bugging her for hours, ever since she barged into that meeting and made away without so much as ripping some poor idiot to shreds verbally for trying to bar her.

At least, no one was sobbing inconsolably when she joined the rest of them.

There was that tree near the front privacy wall, but her mother didn't have Cloud Flame boosted speed to help her get past the guard sweeps. She also had more faith in Vongola's staff than she remotely had in the Sky leading them at all, someone should've just said no to her face because in Italy her mother couldn't have a significant reputation behind her. If she did once, it couldn't have lasted that long.

…even if she didn't think that anyone trying to say no to her would've ended very well.

"Nothing as esoteric as you're probably thinking." The older woman informed her as she passed around train tickets for the next leg of the trip, when apparently her confusion got obvious enough to the point she'd put her out of her misery. "I'm Lady Fiorella's Home Tutor now, sweetie. She called me on ahead so I was expected, making used of what she knows of the Iron Fort's sorting of incoming calls and the staff involved in that as well as her position and influences."

"...okay... that does make a lot more sense." Lisa probably walked through the entire process with her brand-new student, ensuring that what Lady Vongola said would be the result she wanted, before even leaving Moscow for Italy. Sonya was a little disappointed the solution was so mundane, because it was her mother.

"Your faith in me is flattering, but I've been retired from the field a touch too long to get up to anything... ah, interesting." She continued patiently as they sat on one bench and Renato dumped his 'acquaintance' off on the opposite one facing them. "In fact, aside the poor boy the head footman stuck with escorting me to that meeting when the damn idiot said no one should bother them, the staff were delighted to see me. They would very much like their lady back, after all. Miss Fiorella said one of them damn near started crying to hear from her again."

"Which might've ended up with your non-invitation, little dragon lady." The only upright Italian informed her blandly, opting to stand as the women had one bench in this side of the train station and his friend was blinking up at him stupidly on the other. "They have their own opinions on current events and could've certainly arranged for a comeuppance on their lady's own behalf, instead of it being expressly Nono's fault. And with the foreigner, well... they don't exactly have to confess to ruining a more business orientated deal to him in the aftermath."

He just shrugged when she pinned him with her latest unimpressed look. Napping on trains or not, none of them were really fresh enough for serious conversations or handing out the benefit of the doubt to anyone.

"Just so you're aware, not because I'd want you to think better of him. In fact, your probable current plan of avoiding everyone aside Ganauche and Lady Fiorella is probably your best bet. Frankly for their own benefit alone, if not for the 'avoiding death and destruction of half of Italia's structured
organizations before they can manage to kill you part."

"Your Italian has a point, sweetie. Don't rule it out, and certainly make up your own mind, but be aware there are multiple factors." Lisa tiredly leaned over to touch shoulders with her, before straightening up once more with a sigh. "I think I'm getting too old for this kind of excitement... it's well past my bedtime and then some."

"Past mine as well." Allowed the thief gamely, instead of addressing the other subject. "Is D'Attilio sober yet?"

"Nope." Said man cheerfully answered on his own behalf, now blearily inspecting the ceiling in his view. "I also think we passed my place a few hours ago. Where are we?"

"Rome, idiot."

"...well past my place." After that utterly unbothered admission, the Mafioso groggily wobbled into a half-assed sitting-slumped thing and shifted focus to peer at the two women sitting across from him in the overly bright train station. "Miss... Primakova? I guess we're going to see your student? May I impose to close that out for you early, even if I have unintentionally done a shit-ton I'll be properly aghast over later?"

"You may." Lisa allowed magnanimously, even if the man had half-invited himself along already through his meandering questions/non-comment on his current address. "Although you should ask my daughter the time and opportunity to at least get a shower in. You're starting to reek like a brewery."

"Miss Bazanova. Can I please-"

"Fuck, yes. Otherwise we're throwing you into the nearest river."

"Pretty sure the sea isn't too far away, I could probably get him there, dunked, and back before the train gets in." Renato chipped in distastefully, as both the man hauling Dante's drunk ass around and the one who would have to deal with the saltwater in that eventually. "How the fuck do you always know the best time to get drunk?"

"No fucking clue, but it's part of my charm. You never complained before."

"I was one of those drinking with you then."

"...oh, yeah. Fun times."

"Hey, Renato. I've got a question." Sonya interjected after a few drowsy moments, which she debated getting something probably way too sweet for breakfast or just waiting it out until she got home. "How long has Nono been in power? Obviously more than half a decade... but exactly how long?"

"...seven years? At best?" Guessed the hitman, ticking off whichever measurement of time off on his fingers as he counted backwards. "...six years and three-almost-four months. He's a little bit away from being thirty, but Ottavia held off on trading off with him until he was more than old enough."

"Makes sense." Chipped in her mother on her own end. "I recall Daniella Vongola as the Eighth Head of Vongola, making waves for finally planning to step down just before... well. Of course, rumors had been circulating about that for nearly a decade before I heard it. Made a damn uproar when she flatly refused to tell... what was his name? Some horse guy who her son's father was just before I left the island."
"Omar Cavallone, Eighth head of the Cavallone Famiglia, who's generally accepted to be Timoteo's father by those that only listen to rumor." Renato finished for her, a little amused. "So, you were of the last of Ottavia's generation? Makes entirely too much sense, if you ask me."

"Perhaps Daniella Vongola is part of my generation, young man. Ever think of that?"

"I think you might be a touch too young to claim that honestly."

Lisa smirked, even more amused. "Good answer."

The Mafioso tipped the brim of his hat to her with a smirk of his own. "Of course it is."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Fucking Death Castle, where the hell do you think I am Coyote?" Ganauche demanded, raking a hand through his hair and somehow lucking out on not yanking on his eyepatch ties. He'd probably have to get this suit dry cleaned somewhere in town, because spending more than a day in it meant it was starting to get a tiny bit stale to the point of being uncomfortable.

"What the hell are you doing all the way up there?" Asked the Storm Guardian skeptically, and a little more shortly than the Lightning Guardian appreciated.

"Well, as Nono wanted Miss Bazanova to show up to the meeting she wasn't invited to, I kind of had to do a fucking massive amount of stupid shit to get her to agree to it after the fact. And she wasn't feeling like playing 'nice', for your information. I ended up 'escorting' her brat and Tatiana to her place just for her to go to the Iron Fort. Which was the last thing I had to do for her."

The other Mafioso more than twelve hours away made an aggravated groan. "Fuck, that train wreck."

"Yeah, how did that go?"

"Primakova Elisaveta will be Lady Fiorella's Home Tutor, apparently."

…Tatiana's mom? "How was that even a suggestion?"

"She made it herself, and then arranged everything with Lady Fiorella, well before Timoteo even knew the woman was in the country."

The woman was here?

…shit. "Thanks for the news, Coyote, gotta-go-bye."

Hanging up hastily on his fellow Guardian, who would bitch later but he always did that, Ganauche booked it for his girlfriend and her nephew up a level and around an entire waiting room affair right next to the first-floor staircase. They decided to occupy the master's until the lady of the castle got back, which at least meant he knew where she was, and he hammered a fist on the double doors a few times.

Tatiana didn't look entirely impressed at all when she opened it and he nearly hit her. "For fuck's sake, Ganauche. What?"
"Your mom is on her way."

Baby blue eyes stared at him blankly as she failed to absorb that. "...what?"

"Your mom apparently showed up to that meeting last night, and probably if your sister is on her way back she's probably going with if she doesn't have to go back immediately. As your mom's somehow now Lady Fiorella's Mafia Home Tutor, I think she's probably coming here first instead of going home."

"...huh."

"So... is she likely to like me? Because, I'm fully aware how much of a damn clusterfuck last night was..."

"Lisa's not the type of woman to blame the minions for another's stupid shit." His brand-new girlfriend informed him simply, leaning up against the doorjamb tiredly with a yawn. "And guessing if she's going to like you on principle is kind of pointless. Either she will, or she won't, so being on your best behavior is a thing but panicking is going to sabotage you."

"But she's your mom."

Tatiana smirked softly, grabbed him by his half-open shirt to yank him forward, and kissed him briefly. "It's cute you're so worried but calm down. She'll like you just fine because I like you."

Then she shut the door in his face and went about waking up the child that slept with her to run him through the bath apparently.

"Oh, come on... just a little advice?"

"Be yourself!"

"That's clichéd!"

"It'll work!" She called back over the grumpy sounds of a seven-year-old complaining about the noise level.

"Ahem." Startled, the Mafioso whirled around and sheepishly attempted a smile for the Russian lady he hadn't gotten introduced to yet. "Young man, stop shouting."

"...yes ma'am."

"My name is Samuila Zinaida." She gave him a very pointed look. "I don't believe we've met..."

"Erm, Ganauche. I'm with... ah, Tatiana?" Frankly, he didn't know if Vongola's name was mud here or not. He also didn't really want to know either. It'd be really fucking depressing if it was. "So... do you have one of those weird names too?"

"...I am the Bee Lady. Try to keep it down to a dull roar, if you could."

"Sure, I can do that." Ganauche promised a little sheepishly, which just earned him an unimpressed look as the older woman descended the stairs.

Fuck, he forgot to ask Coyote when the group left the Iron Fort. Who knew when he had to suddenly face his girlfriend's mom, and he kind of doubted he'd have the appetite for the breakfast apparently in the process of being cooked somewhere downstairs.
Shamal got hauled up off his feet and cuddled the moment his godmother walked through her front door. "Sorry about that, brat."

"It's okay!" He got the full tour, and then some, with Usov already. Which didn't really include introductions, or at least 'proper' ones for non-Mists so both parties would know one another. "Wait… nonna?"

Lisa tugged a lock of his hair somewhat silently with a smirk, looking a bit cautious of the wide-open castle beyond the main hall staircase he got snagged at and just as tired as everyone else that just arrived.

"We're probably going to sleep in for what little is left of the morning and some of the afternoon, kid." Muttered Sonya a bit sadly, grumbling somewhat irritably before huffing over his head. "We'll finish buying you things for your room tomorrow, probably."

"You're also going to have to buy him some clothing in a fast hurry, as well. Since we rather left abruptly, before the maids could pack him an overnight bag." Interjected his godfather, rather abruptly dumping another man onto the floor the moment he could be considered 'inside'. "Sober up already, Dante."

"Fuck you. I was not going to wait in a room for hours with Nono Vongola and Headmaster Grizzaffi sober. No one sane would do that, especially when your little lady specifically went out of her way to ensure the both of them would be pissed off and exhausted."

His godmother sighed heavily into his hair. "Lisa, my room is straight up the stairs and an immediate two left turns. Tatiana should be somewhere…"

"I'm here!" Shouted the nurse, vaulting stairs to get down them quicker and give the tolerantly amused older woman a massive hug. "Lisa! Ganauche said you were in the country, but to be honest I kind of doubted him a little."

"Oi!" Came the offended call further into the second floor, which meant there'd be yet another person in a few moments.

…wait, if nonna was getting mamma's room, where was his godmother going to sleep?

"I have a bed! You can nap on mine, mamma." Shamal insisted, tugging on the blouse she was wearing. It wasn't like he had used it yet, since he and zia slept in hers.

The offer earned him a tired smirk. "That's a plan. Renato, the fourth level just has Cesare's room. There're three others, hopefully one or two of them have extra beds. Call up Usov if one's missing but throw D'Attilio into one and take the other."

The hitman nodded absently, toeing the other Mafioso a little ungently and critically inspecting the feeble hand that batted at his ankle. With a huff, the older Italian sauntered off for the stairs and the Vongola Lightning Guardian hesitating at the top of them.

"…D'Attilio?"

"Well… that's four floors of stairs. Your ground floor is otherwise solid, nice and cool, and more
"...suit yourself." Decided Sonya after a moment of confused staring. "Go grab breakfast, brat. I'll probably see you again around lunch."

"...err. Is this a bad time?"

His godmother sighed heavily yet again, tiredly looking over at Peter McScruffy. "Can it wait?"

"We've put off telling you until we were sure, and then a little bit more as you were kind of gone for a while. I had a few ideas, Verde had a few more, and we finished it? So... yes? Probably. You kind of have to test it, and frankly knowing if the element we're going with will work or not would save a few days' worth of work..."

She eyed him severely as nonna got led off by zia and left just the four of them on the ground floor of his godmother's castle. "Does this have anything to do with why the man set up your glass crucible in the garage even if you two had a deal for his lab space?"

"...kind of?"

She studied him for a long moment, glanced backwards to the Mafioso probably eavesdropping on them, and then down to him. "I should... probably take care of this before he decides to stall for another week or two and gets messily murdered by an impatient asshole of a Lightning. You, brat, have a bit of a project pending. Talk with the Mirror Lady about the final results of your control experiment, and where it's going next."

"Okay."

"She works nights, so that might not happen until after lunch. You might also want to take that whole thing to Verde as well... what now, Peter?"

"If it has anything to do with the string the Mirror Lady showed me... I used some of it?" Offered the older Sun sheepishly, now actually shuffling his feet. "But it's done! Kind of... maybe."

"What's done?"

"The project you gave me... back in Moscow? Your workbook?"

Sonya apparently had no more idea of what he was talking about than Shamal did. Scruffy's pleased expression faded bit by bit, already damaged as it was by interrupting when it seemed the Storm-Cloud was not remotely pleased by the hold up.

"...it can wait, Sonya. I mean, it's not going anywhere."

"The more you say that the less I believe you." Decided his godmother simply, finally letting him go and stretching out her spine to help her wake up. "Right, whatever. Come on, brat. Let's go somewhere without outside ears and finally figure out what the hell is going on."

…it was better than anything he had planned on, because that was mostly just bugging some of the people that they'd be living with to get to know them. "Sure."

(ooo000000)

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
"…oh, that." Sonya managed after a moment, blinking slowly at the mess of pearly silver string dripping with tiny half-karate pale sea-green jewels connected to two hinged glass circles of different sizes hanging from her left hand.

By 'that', she meant her armor idea and Peter's glass jewel work she hadn't expected him to get on so damn fast.

The end result presented to her was scores better than the chain that required her to hide her skin and could trip off metal detectors when they came into use, and probably would put to rest any worries she had about wearing off whatever plated the chains only to find herself allergic to whatever alloy. Admittedly, it was everything but the glove. Then again, if this idea proved good enough, she could pair it with a pair of black leather gloves with the tiny gem plates sew into it herself.

There was only one garage door open letting in the late morning sun, and a glass crucible affair still burning something a dull cherry red against a darkened wall, but even in the dimness the mess of jewels and spider silk glittered as it hung from her fingers.

Out of respect to the fact she didn't expressly need the metal, only something to take impact damage, Peter had scrapped all those bulky and hard to miss metal scales in favor of something a lot more discrete. Tiny plates of glassy stone scales, which could either pass as decoration or hidden under her clothing a hell of a lot better than magnetic chains could be.

Apparently stalling out on how to hold the whole idea to her form if there wouldn't be a metal framework to attach everything to, it took a bit of Pavuchky's silk netted together in a kind of fishnet affair where the jewel 'scales' needed to be up against her arms. They dotted the places where two strings of spider silk crossed, hence the fish net impression, securely held in place due to what appeared to be small holes bored through the underside only at a middle-high point in the glass gems.

The idea would probably be to enlarge the crystals with her Cloud Flames, then those tiny gems smaller than Shamal's pinky nail could be more than enough to cover her arms.

The segmented bracelet and armlet the hopefully Flame-resistant spider silk were attached to was a bit more interesting and wasn't particularly clunky for all its single purpose in holding the strands weighted down with glassy teardrop jewels close to her skin. Verde's contribution to the 'project' she hadn't actually given the Sun with any intent, it again wasn't a metal since her Storm Flames could and would melt that to ash.

The circlets of sea-green colored glass gleamed at her in the dim light of her mostly abandoned garage, segments swinging freely even if she couldn't spot any of the material holding it together and allowing for the movement… was it hinged with yet more glass?

"Cutting the crystal hinges for those was the hardest part." Peter volunteered when apparently the silence got to the still edgy man, pointing out the fiddly bits of glasswork handing from her fingers. "Verde's kind of a... perfectionist. He wouldn't work with anything but exactly what he asked, and so we spent a few days just finding the right material mix to pass for spinal gems and Hawk couldn't shatter to fragments in two seconds. Then a few more dripping the molten glass in a pattern I could try to cut, and Verde tossed about ninety percent of them out as flawed as we adjusted the process."

"It would not have worked as needed without exact." The man cut himself off and harrumphed moodily under the curious gaze from about waist high aimed up at him. Shamal didn't entirely look all that impressed with him for that, tugging on her skirt as he turned back to her.

"Mamma, why did you bring me with?"
She knelt down, balancing a strand of the silk taught in one hand while lifting a flickering fragment of ruby red Storm Flames up to it with her other.

"Boss Lady!" Peter made an abortive movement, hesitating when her Flames failed to snap the fragile looking threads and they started to glow an interesting green color.

"...fascinating." Spoke the Lightning after a moment, drawing closer to the point the dull colors reflected off his stupid coke bottle glasses. "I did utilize my Flames upon the string, we were uncertain of if the heat of the glasswork would stress it to fragility while securing them to the bracelet halves. Is the reaction from that procedure or from an innate quality? Where did the string come from?"

"That's why Shamal's here. It's his intellectual property, and his personal project that resulted in this material." She informed him pointedly, letting her Flames go and smoothing the pad of her fingers down the silk to test heat retention and if there was any more give than the last time she tested Pavuchky's silk. "You, and Anna as she has adopted the test subject, need to talk about how to go forward with this. Flame-resistant cloth is something everyone and their slightly shady uncle will be interested in somehow getting at least a set of clothing out of. With what string we have, I can possibly make a small bolt of cloth for Verde to test if you want to explore the possibilities."

The spider was stronger now than the last time it produced a square of silk to patch her borrowed dress, a full half a minute and the strands of spider silk were just changing color instead of giving away. That had to mean Anna's pet had a will of its own, however there was no way to tell if it was the same kind of 'will' a human had.

Shamal scrutinized her closely, even if she was backlit by the strongest light source in that area. "Why me?"

"Because, brat. Properly managed this," she jangled the mess of spider silk and glass in one hand between them, "can set you up for life. Financial security, through a shell company held for a ghost-account if you don't want to work in fashion or fabric production, that you can draw from if anything happens in the future. But, it's yours. This is a result from your own work and effort, and therefore if you don't want to share what started as a gift for someone else you don't have to."

Given the strangled noise from Verde, the Lightning would really beg to differ.

The sharp look she shot him kept the man from commenting, but the mulish look on his face refused to be knocked off. Lucky for him her godson spoke up before she very pointedly demonstrated there were hard limits to what information she'd let him at.

"...will it help?"

"I've burned off my clothing before, it was rather uncomfortable. So yes, it will help Flame users avoid that and similar events in the future."

Her brat made a rude noise at her, smirking at the raised eyebrow she gave him in return as he gripped her biceps. "Will it help you, mamma? Because that just sounds like I should only give you and Mister Renato access to it."

"...I'd greatly appreciate nailing down a stable income for you well before it could become an issue, and in our world having a little ace in the hole for hard times can be a life-saver. Especially if no one knows you have it." She admitted dryly. "Not to say that means you can ignore the whole 'get a job' affair in the future, but if you decide to study something expensive or take a few months off here or there for whatever aim you always can without risking yourself to get that leeway."
"Then okay. I'm not really interested in strings, or cloth. I mean, it's interesting..." Here the Mist gave the byproduct of his first foray into scientific investigations a sideways look. "...but I'm kind of done with the project."

Yeah... she highly doubted it. She gave it two seconds after he got a good look at Pavuchky before he was very damn interested again. "Alright then. I'll give Verde your notes, and if you feel so strongly about it he can deal with Anna about continuing the project in your name. We'll hide your involvement behind him, and he'll probably hide behind me and Björn if only to avoid the fashion industry hounding him. Just say so if you want to hear how it's going."

Shamal, the colossal brat who probably didn't know how much money they were talking about, simply shrugged.

Sonya smirked. "Go get lunch, brat, and welcome home."

She got a strong hug before the kid skipped on out them, almost evaporating through a wall in a puff of indigo smoke instead of open it and walk the few feet to the castle proper. Rising back to her full height, she stripped the chains she had been using off to try on the new glass gauntlet.

"Verde... I am way too damn tired to be understanding or nice. The string discovery is Shamal's sole work on it, from his ideas and Flames, the Mirror Lady just minded his project. If he says 'no, you can't study it' then you'll fucking respect that."

"...it does not seem to be an issue." Sidestepped the Lightning, lifting a boney shoulder under her entirely irritated glower. "I cannot promise to refrain from postulating, or experimentation, once I know something is possible. Had your young child refused, I would have attempted to find it another way than through what is already made."

She eyed him with exasperation, then just tossed the mess of metal links and sharp weapon charms at Peter's surprised form. "Whatever. That'll have to be good enough for a non-issue."

Shamal certainly could and would gain his revenge if he felt slighted any by the Frenchman, and she'd certainly help him if that was what he wanted.

Thankfully the spider silk was lightweight and not as intrusive as the chains were to wear, which meant if this worked she could go back to form fitting sleeves again, and the glass catch for both plated circles were simple enough. The teardrop 'scale' glass jewels were more annoying as they flipped around, the points needed minding otherwise they would tangle into the silk and her clothing.

Once the whole affair was affixed to her arm with a set of sharp glassy clicks, Sonya forced enough Cloud Flames into the 'scales' to grow them to a decent size to cover her skin and test how resistant they were to the force. A few musical pops told her they worked just as well as natural spinal gems did and looking at the result of oddly lukewarm crystal scale mail armor showed that either too many broke or not enough teardrop crystals were used to completely cover her arm from mid-bicep to wrist.

Enough lasted to get the general idea, ignoring the broken or missing scales which were apparently made to overlap. The design didn’t quite accommodate for all the missing glass, and the end result was decidedly lopsided.

Peter sighed exasperatedly at the fragments, shrinking back to their original sizes, scattered on the floor of the dim room lit only by his still going glass crucible. "I thought if Hawk couldn't shatter them in seconds they'd at least survive you."
"...frankly, for the type of gem you replicated, this isn't an unusual result. I thought you only had the recipe for sapphires, and needed more time to find how to make the others?"

"I had the chemical compositions of other glassy mineral formations recorded already. We extrapolated backwards to form the result you now wear." Verde adjusted his glasses impatiently, gesturing with one hand to the still going glass crucible glowing ominously behind the men. "Getting the proper rubidium volume for that crystal type proved... interesting as it is. We utilized a rubidium-hydroxide solution, although during the annealing process it is entirely possible the element oxidized with another to produce the greener tinge to the final result. Overall, if this is not a usual happening for your use of the elemental mixture, then the undesired chemical reaction may not have been a key issue as we theorized it might be."

Sonya flexed her arm, to be sure even with the missing scale plates wouldn't pinch or otherwise mark up her skin, and then glanced at him in confusion when she figured out it was a missing plate that pinched the underside of her elbow. "What do you mean?"

"The violet color in spinal crystal formations is caused by trace amounts of rubidium impurities while the mineral is forming." Lectured the scientist, retreating to a heavily abused and slightly charred looking notebook sitting forlornly in the dark on a nearby shelf. A few sparks of electric green Flames started crackling around his glasses, which was a stupidly better reading light than her idea of glowing eyes had been, and he carelessly flipped through some of the battered pages to those showing more char marks. "To be more specific, the wide color range and Flame preference of the spinal crystal formations has been enlightening when paired with my half completed chemical breakdown analysis from college. Rubidium, in a process called a flame test, emits a steady purple flare of color when burned over an open flame. Equally... blue spinal occurs from zinc impurities, which emits blue flames when exposed to high heat, to even black spinel which has iron corruption of the chemical breakdown and which burns a yellow for Sun Flames."

"So... the chemical elements in the rocks has an influence on the type of Flame user that prefers which sparkly rock?" Chemical composition would make a hell of a lot more sense than just 'color', but as she was fucking nine when she thought of it Sonya was of the opinion she could be excused for that wrong assumption.

"A hypothesis I would like to test before attempting to find the proper resistance in this apparently naturally occurring silk string and a chemical process to mimic it." Agreed the man simply, slapping the journal shut softly with one hand and turning back to her. "Which then begs a question, how are we to test further discoveries in the realm of the fabrication of crystalline formations? There are a decent number of us here, but you do not have all types of all walks of life for inclusive tests just yet."

...asshole. It sounded like he expected her to end up with that many fucking people.

"There is, passed out on my floor, a man who works for Italy's Mafia School full of tetchy Flame brats. It is likely that either through him, or Shamal when he attends, we will be doing blind testing with an uncorrupted body of test subjects as a final check of whatever end result will be. Until such time you believe you can tune a glass-crystal mix to whatever Flame type without personal testing, further experiments would be given to my mother to oversee with the Moscow Flame Academy." She informed him pointedly, sliding her arm out of the now shrinking glass armor and handing it back to Scruffy. "If Verde's right, try to find a stone that either rejects or withstands Hawk's Flames that is of a Cloud's 'chemical' preferences. Spinal was a good start, I started on them, but I stopped when I started breaking way too many to be uniformly useful. I switched to amazonite for use with my Cloud Flames."

Verde flipped through the papers in his hands, going back to less abused notes. "Curious... I do not
believe amazonite has rubidium within its chemical composition."

She hadn’t really expected any new discoveries until either Galina or she herself felt up to tackling the entire headache of their 'stolen' records from the empirical testing effort. Verde's impatience and inability to do simple busy work paid off for her, but it was almost equally as annoying as it was helpful really.

"The thing is, Sonya, the annealing process for making the crystals form kind of screws with the chemicals we’re using," Peter informed her after a moment, absently fiddling a few fragments of the broken glass 'scales' as she reattached her chains for the about five minutes it would take to go up to Shamal's bed and take a nap. "This was the best of multiple batches made from a few days of work at it, and most of the time was taken by 'cooking' the gems than shaping them. Even then, they're not very big..."

"I don't need them big, and until such time you find a good recipe you might as well keep the resulting rocks small. More might be a suggestion, to reduce how much Cloud Flames I press into the gems to plate even my bicep and possibly prevent an instant shattering of the weaker ones."

"If you feel as if teaching an adult to utilize diamonds is within your scope, we could graduate to the more durable grades of glassy mineral formations quickly." Chipped in the Lightning almost dismissively, betrayed by the way his sharp green eyes gleamed with his interests. "Cubic zirconia has become a commercially traded gemstone, made within a laboratory or not, which may prove to be a more suitable alternative more easily acquired for this project."

"Peter might as well take his time until he has more of these glass gems to experiment with," Sonya interjected for Scruffy when the sort of self-conscious Sun seemed a little discouraged by the suggestion, and given his inability to teach another Sun of the group back in Moscow she kind of understood his hesitant and unhappy reaction, "you have a different project to review and get familiar with in the meantime. Also, if you could prevent or avoid the cannibalistic side-effect, we'd all appreciate it."

Verde blinked at her blankly, apparently taken aback either by the abrupt turn in subject or the fact 'cannibalistic' was a trait in his next project. Sonya stalked off before he could formulate a response, keenly interested in getting in another nap at the least before her sharp tongue got someone else in trouble or really uncomfortable with another person.

She could use the chains for a few more months, before asking where they thought to hide her weapon charms on that piece of armor.

At the very least, it was a promising and better replacement… as soon as it stopped shattering when in use.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Why are you here?"

Larion sighed heavily, having expected this confrontation ever since he begged for Sonya’s help in relocating his family, looking up from his plate. "Because my dad got… displeased that people were targeting me to try to kill your mom. And I put up with an entire section of 'head buried in the sand' Rains for a full year, I kind of needed a big break from that."
Shamal didn't remotely look sold on his reasoning but then again, he had also expected that.

"My mom's also standing in for her when she's gone, so she doesn't have to micro-manage the whole castle when you two aren't here." Chipped in the Rain after a moment, hoping this wasn't going to be a 'thing' as little details could become to irked Mists. "I'm... not doing much of anything, because I really didn't want to irritate you."

The younger boy considered that, then him, suspiciously. "You're not going to try to kill anyone, right?"

"I'm pretty sure my assassination days are well behind me," Larion confirmed dryly. "I don't think I made a good one, given Miss Bazanova barely needed a moment to stop me cold even without you."

"You sucked as an assassin, might be for the best." Shamal informed him a little snottily, but he'd overlook that just to keep the kid from objecting stridently to the only one that could move his entire family back to a place he was pretty sure they'd not do nearly as well in. Suddenly switching gears, which was definitely a sign the whole subject would be remembered and not forgotten or left in the past, he clambered up the nearest chair.

"What are you doing?"

"Keeping an eye on you." The smirk the Mist was wearing let him know that without a doubt the process would be explicitly a pain in his ass.

Well, Mist verses Rain.

"Okay then." Larion allowed easily.

The trick to being unbothered, even for someone with his Dying Will Flame type, was just to accept it. The younger boy had an entirely legitimate point to hate or otherwise dislike him, he tried to kill his godmother.

There wasn't a whole lot he could do in response but see if he could get the kid to eventually accept him as a friend or something.

"What's for lunch?"

"Were you here for breakfast?" Larion and his parents got up early, half because his mom had to make the meals the last few days and half because his dad had an idea to check into, so it was entirely possible they missed each other if the kid had been a little later to it. "Mom kind of reuses whatever's made for breakfast in lunch, so since there was a good amount of sausage and eggs left over we're having golubtsy and makaron on po-flotski."

"Meatballs wrapped in cabbage boiled in tomato juice, and pasta?" Guessed the younger boy after a moment.

"There can be rice or buckwheat in the first and any number of other ingredients in both too, but pretty much." He helped with chopping everything up, because with the other chef out on his own business there was a little more than one woman could do. Especially if any of the guests, even the one guy left on the floor near the front door, woke up hungry.

The other child hummed noncommittally, summoning up an innocent smile when Miss Bazanova's sister dipped into the dining hall. "Hi zia! Did you need something?"

"Nya went to bed, right? She didn't join Lisa for it."
Shamal nodded. "She took my bed."

"Aww, how sweet of you. Hi Larion, doing okay?"

"I'm doing fine." He kind of really hoped she didn't linger over him too long, the kid next to him would probably add that to his 'tally of offenses' he had to address.

The nurse hummed, unconvinced. "Checkups are going to start happening next week, you both and the other 'youngsters' are going to be first. Your dad finally got in the last of the equipment I asked for."

"Where?"

"That still empty side room off the front hallway, there's a cot and a few odd and ends I can use as a writing desk or storage." She ruffled Shamal's hair fondly before wandering off, apparently to keep spreading her news to everyone in the castle today.

Larion went back to his worksheet, expressly made by his mom so he'd have the best grasp of the local language before he had to attend school. It took only five minutes of it before Shamal declared him boring.

"That's your problem, not mine."

Apparently, that wasn't a desired response for the Mist. "I could make you interesting…"

"You could, but my mom will complain to yours if you do."

There was an eerie amount of silence going on, that went with plotting Mists dampening things around them to do said plotting.

The Rain slowly raised his head from his work. "Mom runs not only the kitchen but the castle when yours isn't here. Making trouble for me probably will annoy yours more than mine."

"Doubting me…" Shamal observed slowly, obviously weighing something in his mind. "…no faith, I swear."

That was not good sign in any hopes to solve this problem quickly. "I have full faith you can make my life miserable, it's just that doing so will not just negatively affect me."

Suddenly another Mist inserted himself into the conversation, draping his arms around both their shoulders. "I feel I must interject here, boys. Shamal, you should know better. Larion, Rain-negotiation methods will not work on Mists as they will on everyone else. We take it as a challenge, obviously."

"Usov…"

"Miss Sonya has explicitly gone out of her way to build up a self-running household, or not as it really depends on how you look at it, and yes it includes the one that initially tried to kill her… but he sucked at it. Disrupting it would cause her to spend more time on everyone here and less on you."

The older brunette shifted attention to Larion, a wry smirk on his mouth. "You… need to learn better. Pure bait for Mists trying to tell them everything that will go 'wrong' with their ideas. I know you Rains didn't get out a whole lot, so you have some catching up to do, but seriously. Personal motivation, not something aimed for the whole."

"I'll keep that in mind." Larion promised dryly. "Anything else you care to chip in?"
"Lunch is almost done, the Mirror Lady will be late to it, and… Cesare's back." Usov informed the both of them before releasing them and twisting on his heel while disappearing back to wherever he had been before interjecting.

His way was at least a hell of a lot less showy than the other Mists he'd seen, unless the other kid was aiming to be showy.

"…Dante, I'm only going to ask this once." The same assassin-chef the older of the two Mists spoke of asked from deep into the hallway to the front door and the main staircase, sounding just a little aggravated. "Why are you on the floor?"

"Because I'm hungover, and Miss Bazanova said to suit myself. Now stop shouting."

"I'm talking, you rapscallion."

"Still too loud, shut up. It's a library, isn't it?"

"…right…"

Shamal thought about it, turning to him in the resulting silence from the hall. "Who's Cesare?"

"Apparently, a not-friend of your 'Mister' Renato." Admitted the Rain slowly, thinking about it only a few moments more. "Other than that, a really flamboyant Italian Mafioso and Miss Bazanova's head chef."

The disapproval in his tone was honest enough, he didn't really like the guy flirting with his mother every damn second. His dad might've decided the flirting was just Cesare being Cesare, and unless something happened from that they shouldn't expressly worry, but Larion still didn't like listening to it.

And, equally honestly, he was pretty sure the Mist riffled through his thoughts to decide if he liked the new Mafioso or not before he got into the dining room. If he didn't like the man, obviously the other child then would just to ensure Cesare would remain around the place flirting with his mom and annoying him.

"Oh? What's this now…?" Asked the freshly returned Italian curiously while peering at Shamal questioningly, who was studying him cautiously back.

"Cesare, meet Shamal." Larion introduced passively, glancing down at the worksheet he had to finish off before his mom called everyone in for dinner. Almost barely halfway, and it was very nearly lunchtime.

"So... you are that rascal's little ankle-biter, hmm?" Observed the Mafioso softly, dumping off a few tough brown paper bags full of goods on one of the cleared dining tables. "Interesting… I must commend you for your taste in women, the Lovely Bossy Dragoness is a fine example. Russian or not."

"What's wrong with being Russian?" Shamal inquired politely, a little betrayed by the dark blue gleam in what should've been brown eyes.

"I, am not that suicidal." Cesare insisted with all due pomp and making a show out of laying a hand over his heart, sniffing with faux insult. "And seriously, child? Look around you… what do you see? The Lovely Bossy Dragoness has built up the bare beginnings of a famiglia, missing just a few touches here or there, expressly for you. Some obviously she wants, some she's forced to do with the size of things, but it exists here in a land she does not seem all that interested in."
"Well maybe," started the young Mist a touch sarcastically, "if most Italians mamma knows don't piss her off in a handful of seconds... she'd be more interested."

"Indeed. Well! I am pleased to report I did avoid 'pissing her off in a handful of seconds'.” Whirling around and scooping up his shopping back into his arms, the assassin gave Larion's mom a winsome grin and hefted his armful. "Lovely Ruslana! I return victorious, with the spices we've been missing!"

"Did you pick up any more coriander? I believe we might be scraping the bottom of the barrel for dinner unless you or Afonya... oh you did, good." His mom sighed thankfully at the rather small container filled with tiny tan powder, as well as a separate somewhat larger glass bottle filled with what looked to be seeds that were passed to her. Stepping fully out of the kitchen just to see what the Mafioso would have to put away beyond her anyways, the greenette blinked at her son in question. "Larion? Who's beside you, dear?"

"This is Shamal, mom. Should I go start calling people to lunch?"

"It's about done, would you?" Turning to the other child, she smiled softly at the curious gaze aimed up at her. "It's nice to meet you, Shamal. Can you help my boy call the others in, please?"

"Yes ma'am." The Mist agreed politely, even hopping down from the chair he picked to sit in.

Larion was actually, honestly, somewhat surprised the other kid actually left the room to do so. If he did anything aside just appear like he was doing what she asked, he'd be even more surprised.

"Larion, don't dawdle." His mother chastised, flapping a hand towel at him as she distractedly tried to peer into the shopping Cesare brought in with him. "And see if you can get Verde and Peter in early, instead of have the two of them wait until the last moment yet again."

The Rain abandoned the worksheets she gave him this morning and did as told, at least only as far as the front hallway with the weird guy still sleeping there. Usov was waiting with Shamal for him, yet again and still mildly amused as he did so.

"As I said, the Mirror Lady will be late. Miss Sonya would probably not appreciate being woken after just nodding off either." The older Mist glanced at the younger at his side, then back to Larion. "You're in luck, Scruffy and Verde are at a 'breaking off point'... but it's a coin toss if that's exactly what the Lightning meant so he'd go along with it. Your dad and Hawk are still gone, but the Vongola Lightning Guardian is still in with Miss Tatiana on the second floor sitting area."

"What about the Chinese pair?" He asked, because in all the people that could be in or out for the day the two of them were new enough to be occasionally overlooked accidently. "Miss Galina?"

"Miss Galina is out, with Hawk for some reason. Miss Mingxia and old Master Yaozu are in their respective rooms. As is Miss Sonya's mother, in her room, and another guest in her 'gentleman caller' in the room adjoining Cesare's."

"You probably don't want to bother nonna or Mister Renato, or the guy flat out on the floor." Chipped in Shamal thoughtfully, tapping a finger against his chin in thought. "They probably won't appreciate being woken until the start of dinner, same with mamma."

"I heard that, young man."

"...and?"

"...point." The nicely dressed if a bit more than wrinkled man rolled over, slowly pushing himself to his feet. "Could one of you show me to an empty bed? Since it seems I'm directly in the way of traffic
"right here…"

"I'll do it." Larion decided after exchanging a look with the other two. "Come on, then."

"I'll introduce you to our Chinese pair." Usov informed Shamal politely at least, before both Mists decided to not be there anymore.

"How rude." Absently commented the strange man idly.

"Excuse you?"

"Mists down here are asked to refrain from warping reality on whims unless asked specifically by-"

"And what, if anything, does that mean here?" Larion interrupted before he could finish, a bit annoyed on Usov's if not also Shamal's behalf. "Miss Bazanova doesn't mind, so…"

"It means, young man, that outsiders will consider them rude." Spreading his hands, even if that meant he listed over and half-fell against the wall, he simply shrugged. "I'm an outsider, I found it rude. It's just... generally accepted."

"Unless Miss Bazanova explicitly asks them not to, they're not being rude even by your own views. She's not put any kind of limit on the three Mists that live here so far, so you expecting them to conform to something you never said anything about is actually rather rude of you."

The guy peered at him sideways, then rubbed his face with the hand not supporting him more or less straight. "I must be worse than I thought... I could've sworn I just lost an argument to a young boy."

"You did." He helpfully announced. "Come on, you should probably get something to drink on your way to an actual bed."

"We're revisiting this later." The still unintroduced man announced flatly, but gamely pushed off the wall and shambled his way.

"Turn around, the stairs are behind you."

"...I knew that."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 29th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Seventeen people, no matter how few of them were under the age of ten, somehow did not fill out her youngest's dining hall. Lisa, after having borrowed her daughters' apparently shared bathroom to take a bracing rinse-off herself and pulling out a more casual outfit from her luggage than the pants suit she hastily bought to make the right impressions, felt slightly like an intruder for all of three moments.

She didn't think she was very late, but there were plates of cheeses and other simple foods already out and being grazed on.

There were knots of obvious family or friend groups on the edges, but the 'main' center table closest to the kitchen and the front hallway was almost nearly packed with individuals said daughters knew and she didn't.
At least, she felt displaced and strange like a pauper in a castle until Shamal spotted her. "Nonna! Over here!"

"You don't have to shout." Sonya half-complained and sort of more slurred into his kinked brown hair, resettling her cheek back on his head to drowse a few more seconds.

"Think you should sit properly, brat?" Renato Sinclair, equally freshly showered and somehow completely awake unlike how she felt even after a lengthy nap, drawled sarcastically from two spots over past an empty chair before politely rising to his feet to pull out her chair for her.

"But that's nonna's spot." Insisted the young Mist innocently, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth as one half of his godparents pinned him with an exasperated look and the other napped on him.

Across the somewhat longer table the one-eyed young man seated next to a widely grinning Tatiana paled two shades as he realized that would put the mother of his girlfriend right across from him. Instructor D'Attilio, apparently nursing a hell of a hangover, sipped his 'hair of the dog' shot of neat whisky with a faintly miserable expression next to him.

Young Adrik was bickering in a friendly manner with some very green young man with a humorless expression seated almost directly to her right near the open archways, even younger Larion was seated with his parents and with Usov's family at the longer table directly next to her daughters'. There was a very distinguished elderly Chinese man speaking with a young girl, Yaozu and Mingxia if she recalled right, seated at a smaller table under a window. Her youngest's foundling Sun was seated across from the efficient Galina, speaking of some topic between themselves. Anna the Mirror Lady rounded off those living here, almost holding court in her own back corner where she could see the entire room and likely utilize the windows for her rather esoteric art.

Lisa came up to 'her' spot, glancing between her daughters. "...girls."

Sonya suddenly sat ramrod straight, Tatiana's mischievous grin disappeared as if it was never there. The rest of the table stared with various amounts of fascination, but the others in the same room ignored the quietly spoken command and the reaction in evoked.

After a second, her youngest peered up at her irritably. "It's my table, I'll nap on it if I want to."

She smirked back at her as she gingerly seated herself in the chair as Mafioso Sinclair sat back in his own. "You could. I would like to eat something today, though."

"...maybe after dinner." She amended after a second.

"Well, what do you know? It's a miracle." Deadpanned her eldest, slowly regaining her smirk. "Lisa, this is my boyfriend Ganauche. He's Timoteo Vongola's Lightning Guardian."

Given Sonya muttered 'the Defective' under her breath the same time as the spirited nurse was introducing her new young man to her, Lisa gamely ignored the sudden kick the Sun gave the apparently vastly contrary feeling Storm-Cloud under the table.

"It's a... well." She attempted to start then had to amend her salutation almost immediately, but by the self-conscious shifting going on at the other end he fully understood her mixed feelings on the matter. "It's interesting to meet you, Ganauche."

"Yeah, I had nothing to do with last night. I'll be sure to look specifically into it, and how that ever managed to happen at all, first thing when I go back."
"Bit like shutting the barn door after the horse bolted." Chipped in the Mafioso on her left dryly, flatly ignoring the chastising glare the Vongola Lightning Guardian shot him. "There's only so many times I can realistically go 'no, they're not incompetent' before it starts sounding like a flimsy claim. And I rather dislike being proven wrong three times in a row."

"Or, you know," Instructor D'Attilio added his two kopecks slightly sourly, gesturing with the merger amount of liquor left in his tumbler, "the procedures for interacting with non-Italians haven't been updated in... three? About three, decades. So, no phone protocol, pretty sure about half if not all of any cultural notes on this or that foreign syndicate have all become outdated, and what there is of it is probably considered 'quaint' if not outright 'antiquated' instead. Now that there's an entire Soviet invasion of a type, not a whole lot know what to do in the face of it... what's right, what's not right, which still doesn't excuse not inviting the key player to a meeting involving them."

"I'll be sure to update it, at least by two decades, with young Miss Fiorella." Lisa promised politely as her eldest's new boyfriend flushed slightly, earning herself a rather unfair suspicious eyeballing in return from the Mafia School Instructor.

The fact her daughters then made clear to the other Mafioso they did not appreciate his casting doubt on her abilities by silently glaring back was sweet of them. Even young Shamal got into it, looking highly disproving indeed.

"To be fair, I retired fifteen years ago. Girls, try not to make him throw up what little is left in his stomach."

"I'll, or more to the point Bjørn, should know what's left." Sonya informed her, which would nicely cover the details that might've developed since she left the art of theft to the younger generations to raise them. "If you come up with any questions that have more recent world events influencing them."

"I'll keep that in mind, Nya." Lisa promised as yet another man, this one she had no idea was here, entered the dining hall followed by floating plates of food.

The floating plates replaced the small finger-foods with a single platter of smoked meats and some pasta salad, before the man turned to the 'main' table she was seated at. "Ladies, some gentlemen, and assorted related idiots, the lobster bisque, lasagna, and risotto of the first course shall be out momentarily. As the Mirror Lady is supplying the help, merely tell the serving dishes what of which you would like eat when it comes out."

"Cesare's having way too much fun." Idly commented the youngest thief at their table, allowing Shamal to slide off her lap in the other direction from her and take a 'seat' that hadn't existed before that second on the end of their table.

"He rarely gets the opportunity to dictate a full menu, given how many times he's restarted at whichever restaurants." Sinclair provided for her simply, ducking a ballistic fork that very nearly poked holes into his ever-present hat almost as matter of factly as Arseniy ducked her when he annoyed her. "And you're having guests on top of that, so to impress is what he's going for."

Instructor D'Attilio very helpfully pulled the fork out of the surprised Ganauche's suit sleeve without really bothering to look, proving a long-term association between at least three of the Mafiosi in the building.

…actually, that just made her a little homesick on second thought. Lisa didn't have a big kitchen, or a massive castle, but she had something a lot cozier and more personal than the literal library themed castle her youngest now had.
Moscow also had her Arseniy, and Valera. She *dearly* missed her precious baby boy, however nice it was to interact with her daughters once again as their equal and not just their mother.

"Why are you two friends, again?"

"We're not." Sinclair and D'Attilio spoke at the same time, in the exact same dismissive flippancy as the other. Which was answered by a bark of sarcastic laughter echoing out of the kitchen.

Lisa looked at Sonya in askance, who shrugged her confusion back at her. "*I don't bother to try to understand what it is between the three of them, honestly.*"
Chapter 12

(Saturday the 30th of May, 1970. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Jabbing the haunch of bear meat with a fork experimentally to check how done it was, Arseniy considered the size of it as it seared away on the pan surrounded with sliced onions. Glancing backwards and taking in Valera's semi-grumpy expression as he waited for breakfast, the vor wondered if the boy was old enough to chew up steak properly or if he should cut it into strips to help.

Well… he'd keep an eye on the brat, if it seemed he was having trouble then he'd do something then.

Sawing the meat in half Arseniy slapped the end result of last night's excitement in the neighborhood on two plates with two different styles of eggs already done on them, then poured the caramelized onions over both plates evenly and discarded the hot pan into the sink. When he took them to the table Valera kept on giving him an expectant look than dig into his bear meat and scrambled eggs, and it took another moment of thought before he recalled Lisa had been trying to ensure their youngest developed a taste for milk like their middle two had the grace to have upon arrival.

Seemed to be working just fine, she'd be pleased to hear it.

Getting them both a mug of milk, because now it had been brought up that sounded pretty good, finally solved whatever little issue his son had with the meal. Contrarily to his expectations, after a first experimental chew Valera decided he very much liked steak and went to town on it. Almost ignoring his eggs, until he realized that steak and onions with eggs went pretty damn well together.

…maybe they should have the liver and mushrooms for dinner, with some boiled potatoes for the flavor.

Keeping half an eye on the brat's progress as he dug in too, Arseniy considered their situation.

Obviously, while he could get along without Lisa… he didn't particularly care to. She hadn't even been gone for very long, and it seemed his feelings on the matter were fully shared by their biological child.

The vor didn't mind or greatly care the school project of Sonya's becoming more and more a focus for Lisa, as they couldn't have yet another brat like he had been half expecting his lover to want now that most of their kids were gone.

Raising another child, under the shadow of Tatiana the first Zolotov Sun healer or the rogue master thief Sonya, would do them no favors. Everyone would expect, as all or a good half of their brats were skilled in mystical arts and had the reputation in their own rights, that any further children they raised would be equally as skilled and impressive. Flatly ignoring that Cherep went his own damn way instead of following the crowd, belatedly followed by his younger sister or not, and Valera was too young to have more than the same mystical skill by what seemed chance and formidable example set by his siblings.

As adopting or actually having another child was out, Valera's conception and birth was risky enough that even if it was possible Arseniy would still baulk at risking Lisa that way again, an entire school of brats needing instruction very nicely took up that remaining desire to fuss with children.
He'd greatly appreciate her being distracted and nearby instead of distracted and gone. Although, as he'd done it several times to her when she wanted otherwise handling this or that for old man Milos, Arseniy had no grounds to dislike her work pulling her away from him slightly.

If it bothered him enough, he'd join in on the 'guest lecturers' planned on for next year to put more an emphasis on the Zolotov Thieves' Clan as the syndicate to join after graduating from the facility before anyone else wised up to needing to recruit the brats. Then she'd be right next to him and distracted if he wanted that, and it would solve the whole damn situation nicely without needing him to raise the point.

Valera gnawed off another hunk of meat to chew on as if it had personally insulted him using both hands and the two front teeth he had, and Arseniy belatedly realized that while giving a two-year-old a steak knife might not be the best idea… it meant he really should've cut his meat up for him.

…well, too late now. The kid would just need a bath and a change of clothes after getting a significant amount of steak juice all over himself. Besides, his son looked perfectly content without one and with his meat in a solid chunk. Chewing away enthusiastically enough with an onion sticking to his hair and bits of scrambled egg dotting his steak juice smeared cheeks.

According to his younger daughter, everyone but Tatiana and Lisa shared the 'Cloud' Flame type. Independent was probably the 'first' thing an outsider would think of when talking about Clouds, which was a damn myth and somewhat irritated him.

He didn't think he did too badly at being a father, his kids didn't seem to mind he wasn't talkative often, and that meant he had dependents and wasn't independent. Being able to and wanting to were different things, one just needed to look at his middle children as a standout example. Willful for sure, stubborn once they set their minds to something, but being included soothed something spiked and sore in both Cherep and Sonya equally.

Valera enjoyed his siblings 'checking' on him, no matter how long it was getting in between those visits. Naps with Sonya, playing with Cherep, or sitting through whatever Tatiana wanted to prod just to get a hug and her to go along with whatever distraction.

…so, Sonya planned on leaving Moscow entirely even before Valera's birth. The moment she realized her little brother was equally as much a Cloud as her or their older brother, it turned leaving 'Arseniy's territory' part of Moscow into the entire Soviet Union. Partially due to outside influences…

Mostly from what seemed a desire to not turn her baby brother into another Cloud 'like her'.

Arseniy was actually a fan of the 'I moved' theory for why Sonya ended up the way she did. Being removed from what should've been her own territory, and unwillingly shoved up under what she assumed was another Cloud, probably explained a lot of how 'odd' she was if Clouds weren't supposed to move.

As no one could point to something and claim that was why with any accuracy yet, he did appreciate her care in her brother's development into his own person without recklessly impacting it. It might not be an issue, it might, and so just being cautious was always a good trait to see in his damn kids.

He just wished she didn't feel the need to go so far. Again, outside influences resulted in that… but Ukraine was frankly as far as she should've felt safe to go.

He and Lisa could've gotten to Ukraine and back easily enough within a day at worse. Valera could've come with… them…
The vor narrowed his eyes on his son's meal and rethought back through that to double-check his sudden suspicion.

…crafty brat.

It might've always been a more European country, or China, to just remove the possibility of unintentionally influencing her baby brother. Because Sonya was nothing if not an overachiever by nature, so of course she would plan out contingencies for an event or possibility she wouldn't want to come true.

Slightly amused now he could see some of the background of a seemingly passive action not actually being that passive, he turned back to where his mental meanderings were headed to.

She had identified two other Clouds nearby, one of which was more than halfway to the point of being able to stand on his own no matter what was being thrown at him. The other…

With a low hum, Lisa did it enough he had picked up the damn habit from her, Arseniy went back to working on eating himself. Half-plotting out how best to arrange a 'surprise' check up on the Cloud Sonya was mostly certain needed some kind of weapon or help.

There was also that Flame user's knife he should pick up from her still abandoned office, to pass on.

Valera paused, turning to regard the direction the front door was in suspiciously. Arseniy, because with how many damn guns had been fired near him he would be the first to admit he was getting a little deaf in his old age, raised his head that way himself and finally caught the shuffle outside before someone rapped their knuckles against the solid slab of wood making up the front door.

Stabbing his knife and fork into the meat for safe keeping, if Valera was motivated enough he could probably get the knife but they had the 'that's sharp, it hurts' event before while Lisa was still home so he doubted the kid would go for it, he went to go see who the hell was knocking before anyone sensible would bother a vor.

Tatiana's boy Nicolai at least had the grace to look apologetic. "Lisa's not home? Sorry, vor Arseniy… I wanted to speak to her."

With a grunt, because not knowing due to jail time in a foreign land was a decent excuse for the gall, Arseniy left the door open and went back to the kitchen. Taking it as the invitation it was, the probably newly minted younger vor followed him in. "...what?"

"I think your eldest is avoiding me." Admitted the young man as he entered the kitchen only to stand there in full view, scrubbing a hand through sloppily shaved stubble under his chin. "I don't entirely know why."

Under his unimpressed stare, matched damn near perfectly by his son's, Nicolai cautiously continued.

"I know she went to Mafia Land, for the nurse courses. That was known as her next step before we got busted. She wasn't there when I went, and her coworkers said it was a sudden plan change."

"Not entirely." Lisa had been very amused to be begged to let their eldest have a little bit more time to keep their younger daughter company in her new Italian castle by the sea. More than enough to share with him all the motives she’d admit to over a phone line. "Last minute, yes. She'd been working on that vacation for a few weeks, when it occurred to her to help her little sister with something."

"...oh." Thinking it over, the younger man sighed and apparently absentley flexed an arm
experimentally. Likely from a previously broken bone, he had that tick sometimes too. "That makes a lot more sense than what I thought. Suppose I'll just wait until Lisa comes back, unless you know where she's at now?"

"Yeah." He wouldn't be offering it until checking in with his girls, they were women and sometimes the obvious was exactly what they didn't want. "Italy. You can wait for Lisa for the exact address."

"...what are the sisters doing in Italy?"

Arseniy pointed a fork at him in exasperation. "I'm only having that conversation once. You can come back in three days and catch the brief Dmitri needs about the same damn subject."

An utterly lost expression was aimed at him for all of a second, before the boy nodded hesitantly. "Sure. I guess I'll go see where Ziven ended up then."

"Khimki."

"Working for you?" Checked Nicolai, accepting the shrug as good enough. "I'll try not to get in the way."

"Pitch in until he's done if you want." He offered shortly, because the other vor had been working at getting the Khimki Cloud up to snuff for a while now and might appreciate a bit more flexibility for any standout lessons that needed an extra hand to help with. There was no telling when it'd be 'done', according to Lisa it was until both Tutor and student agreed a decent point was reached and with the Flame shit involved there was no guessing until it happened.

With an appreciative nod, all new minted vory were a little lost on what to do next upon getting released due to how isolating jail time could be and losing touch with what was going on, the younger man left the kitchen and by the sounds of it the house as well.

Valera slid down from his spot at the kitchen table, wandering only as far as the hallway to check the vor did leave the house before ambling back to his meal. Amused, because he had the same damn idea only his son beat him to doing it, Arseniy went back to eating and planning out their day.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 30th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"I'm borrowing your red crystal key, Nya." Lisa informed her, holding up the necklace in question as she joined them on the ground floor.

"That's fine."

"Northern Italians prefer a more business-like approach to business dealings, which this would be." Dante chimed in as their traveling group formed up, she was of two minds about including her brat just because Sonya didn't feel like leaving him behind. "I don't think you'd have calling cards made up for expressly this, if we can spare an hour I can arrange for some to be waiting for you to pick up in Genoa."

"I told you we'd have a conversation on etiquette." Her mother observed with amusement, smoothing the thin silver chain to lay flat against her chest and hang the key in a way it wasn't obviously a key unless you stared at her chest for a few full moments.

"At least now I have my wits about me." Returned the Mafioso dryly, straightening his own cuffs in
either a nervous habit or just because Lisa's fussing over her attire made him want to check his own.

"When do you ever have your wits about you?" Renato asked sarcastically, having come back in from checking the rental car Galina got for them yesterday just in time to catch that comment.

"Right now's a good example. Yesterday... not so much."

The hitman made an agreeing sound, which somehow still came off sarcastically.

Shamal smothered his snickers into her thigh, earning an equally amused look from 'nonna' as she became satisfied with her outfit to meet her new student in. "Nya, are you sure about gifting a bottle of vodka?"

"Fiorella mentioned needing to work up to it, so giving her something to try privately seemed like a thing to do." And it was proper Russian vodka, part of the bottles that her mother very thoughtfully added to her luggage for giving her poor daughters in a solidly wine-country. Sonya looked up at Renato when he slid a hand around her hips, because he had rather kept his hands to himself yesterday against her expectations but returned her attention to her mother as she made that damn humming noise of being unconvinced. "She brought me wine, which Tats drank half of, but it seemed to be the thing to do in return out of respect for our differing nationalities."

At least this stuff wasn’t the bootleg potato vodka brewed when the wheat or rye crops failed, but actual decent liquor.

The Inverted Sun waited until Lisa seemed distracted by Tatiana and Ganauche finally getting their act together and coming down the stairs, or at least stop making out in a convenient corner, so the entire group could leave already. "I, little dragon lady, didn't need the opportunity to tempt me more. Especially not in front of your mother."

"Tempt you... shut up."

Renato snickered, at her the asshole, and had the gall to seem utterly unbothered by the short glare she tossed up at him. Shamal decided the both of them were just being weird, and obligingly went to give 'zia' a hug when she gestured for it.

Sonya pretended she didn't notice him there, jabbing the bottom of her bottle of liquor into his stomach 'accidently'. Given the amused look Lisa shot her, she failed in being casual with that and her mother heard everything.

Fantastic.

"I'd like to talk to the brat, if you wouldn't mind." He continued pleasantly in a low tone, but more seriously. "While you're gone. Not specifically for any real reason, but to check first to see if Vongola's Flame orphanage does embed a few 'requirements' in their kids and review that situation for you to weed out the 'stupidity' before it can happen. Then probably have a conversation with him about his father and what really happened to end up with him orphaned."

"Are you sure you want to do that now?" Shamal was really a very mature seven-year-old, but he wasn't exactly as understanding with that maturity as say a teenager might be.

Strangely, it took a few more seconds of staring at each other for the hitman to get her point.

"I might not have much 'later' to play with and do it on my own terms for him." He belatedly informed her with an indolent shrug that wasn't nearly as easy as he probably wanted it to come off, which didn't exactly address her thought either. "I'm being forced to assume it's now or never, and
my responsibilities can't be his if I want this to work."

Sonya was really starting to come to dislike 'him' on general principle, even if he would be saving a bit of her friend in himself.

…somehow, Renato completely missed that thought. Even standing right next to her, when before that was enough to pick up her stray musings.

"I want to talk to you later too." She informed him pointedly, raising an eyebrow silently when he shot her a mildly confused look.

The hitman blinked, frowned, blinked again, then grew honestly surprised. "Huh."

"How did you miss that?"

"You're mostly silent these days so I prefer being next to you, and I try not to on general principle. Frankly, given your castle can easily pass as a university-level library, I assumed everyone was lowering their damn tone here." He shot D'Attilio and her mother a quick look, but the Mafia School Instructor was merely listening to what Lisa wanted and how best to ensure he didn't have to 'interfere' at all with Fiorella's Tutor. Most everyone else was also listening in on it for various reasons even if the bulk of it had been decided last night, and he turned back to her. "How."

"I've not done anything." She couldn't, not without Anna or Usov becoming curious how mind reading was a thing without Mist Flames. As the two of them collaborated with security for her, one of them might've accidentally hit on a way to either block or constrain the hitman's ability to skim thoughts.

From the look of it, he was just as equally surprised and pleased as her.

"Can you-"

"First thing when I get back."

"Thank fuck." At her curious look for the vehemence, the man huffed. "The migraines are getting a bit much."

"That's still a problem?" Her reading something when he was trying to focus could do it, so it stood to reason if he still couldn't shut others out when trying to think it was something he risked pretty frequently. Maybe that would explain why the man was getting in the habit of napping in public and not just on trains or airplanes these days but napping against a wall was a seriously impressive skill even Lisa had raised an eyebrow at.

Obviously, sleeping in snatches while vertical came with a lot of practice at it.

…did large crowds also give him headaches?

Was it a defensive habit he picked up?

He'd move away when a knot of people got too close to them while waiting for the train in Rome. She hadn't thought much of it at the time, simply assuming he didn't want to know what the elderly grandmother thought of her grandson's lady-friend 'wishing' him a good trip, but D'Attilio did get progressively more roughly handled the longer things stretched on getting back here.

Which, to be fair, no one had been remotely surprised by. Sonya only got back to feeling decently well enough to manage 'polite' after dinner herself. Renato had been perfectly fine at dinner, and she
didn't even notice he only responded to verbal comments even if he was 'in range' enough for about a
good half of the table and a few of the next. That could've entirely been just because he was getting
better about not reacting to things, or due to more than half the mental thoughts around him being in
either Russian or a mishmash of languages. Such should've given him an even bigger headache, if it
was crowds that would trigger migraines.

But what about… no, their last Vongola Ball ended rather disastrously. Even looking for it, she
might've not been able to tell if he was particularly in a foul mood about anything else in the early
morning.

The hitman had caught Fiorella's worry well before her, but that also might've just been because she
sucked massively with upset people than being able to read her mind for it.

She waited a moment, but his continued patient waiting didn't so much as falter due to anything that
went through her mind. "It's apparently a non-issue."

"Now, how to replicate it?" Renato pressed keenly, moderating his tone when Dante distractedly
 glanced over at him. "Do you think you can figure out what?"

"You realize it has to be through my Mists, yes? Which means…"

The Sun considered the whole situation for a few moments as Lisa and D'Attilio finally came to an
agreement with how little he was going to risk her irritation with. "I still want to know. Preferably
soon."

"Like I said, as soon as we get back." Sonya reminded him, admittedly a bit confused on his haste.

"...I've got a matter of days."

...oh.

Renato didn't look any happier to tell her than she did to hear it as he let her hip go. "I'm sorry,
Sonya."

"Something wrong?" Lisa inquired curiously, handing over Sonya's purse so they were all ready to
leave.

"...a rather annoying last-minute change in plans he can't get out of." The thief tried, unable to
return her mother's gaze so she shot the man an irritated glare she really didn't feel. "Shamal still
wants his puppy, Renato."

"Yeah!"

The man in question rolled his eyes, snatching up the brat by the back of his shirt to go have his little
talk with him. "I'll deal with it afterwards."

The older Russian didn't look convinced but accepted a quieter 'it's not my secret to tell' on their way
out the doors.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 30th of May, 1970 continued. Superbi Manse, San Martino, Metropolitan City
of Genoa, Italian Republic.)

"Sonya, Tatiana, I'd welcome you in but it's not actually my place." Fiorella greeted just a little
impatiently as the group was shown into the sun room, ignoring Nilda's sigh at her refusing to think or behave like the Superbi household was her own. "Is your mother…?"

The sisters sidestepped equally as far away from each other as the other did, revealing a lovely if businesslike woman who had been standing slightly behind the nurse. The brunette probably at least a decade older than her if at all gave her a tight smile. "That would be me, Miss Fiorella. I am Primakova Elisaveta, Headmistress of the Moscow Flame."

"Oh my God, thank you." She almost stepped forward, then hesitated before hugging the woman. "Um…"

"You may hug me." Elisaveta graciously offered, a slow smirk curling up her lips as she held out her arms. "Deep breath, the easy part is over. That night was entirely too simple."

She carefully, because her younger daughter made it entirely apparent she disliked being touched rather obviously but hadn't said anything when so imposed upon, hugged the older woman tightly in hopes her feelings came through when it seemed the words weren't entirely enough. "Thank you for this."

"Miss Fiorella, I feel I must be brutally blunt. You are a decade past the point you should need a Home Tutor and horribly behind on where you should be as a mafia woman. You will need to work hard, and as this will have to be a long-distance mentorship I've enlisted the help of my daughters."

She gave her a strong hug back, before pulling away to arm's length with a wry smile. "I need you to be equally brutally frank with me, Fiorella. Half of teaching another is physical, knowing when to stop a subject and switch when you're getting too frustrated and just generally gauging your ability to focus through whatever stress. I won't know if you do not tell me, but equally so I must trust that you will not mislead me and just say when you need to spend more time on your boys or some other equally important reason."

"…yes ma'am." She wasn't entirely taken aback at how briskly she got down to business, she half-expected it given her daughters' personalities. "How are Tatiana and Sonya going to help you teach me?"

"Physically. A bodyguard is a good idea for a short-term arrangement and due to your position, a sign of your importance. However, obviously one cannot be with you every second of every day." Lisa's wry smile turned wicked around the edges. "So, Tats will give you a general checkup every few months and teach you how to shoot a gun... and you'll be spending two hours every day for the next two months with Nya learning ballet. Then gymnastics, then knife fighting if you have the time."

Nilda's head shot up in alarm.

"Equally as obviously," Sonya drawled sarcastically, "you're invited, Mrs. Silvery-White. Catch."

She softly pitched something glittery at the platinum blonde's head, who did as asked and caught the pebble of sea-green glass which gleamed with out of place dark indigo flickers in the strong Italian sunlight.

"Tap it against a full-length mirror, or anything large and reflective, and the Mirror Lady will collect you to bring to me. At least so long as you remain in north Italy. Either in the morning or the evening, but two hours Fiorella."

…well, she wanted to get fit.

"Good. You might not become a master at anything over one summer of instruction, but as long as
you can hold off an attacker for at least a few minutes that will be good enough until you have the time to put into it yourself." Claimed the Russian sisters' mother firmly, seemingly knowing her decision before she could speak it. "This will only work so long as you want it, Fiorella. Keep that motivation, work hard no matter what happens, and we will work a miracle with you."

"I want to make my husband utterly regret ever keeping me in the dark and lying in my face in the first place." Fiorella claimed a little boldly, because she wasn't even sure if that was possible. "I want to know what the hell is going on without others 'censoring' what I learn, so I can understand and draw my own conclusions. I want to live my damn life, no matter what it turned out to really be."

No matter what her husband turned out to really be. He was still her husband, the father of her sons, and as she had sworn 'for better, for worse' in front of God… she would at least live up to that promise.

…of course, he didn't need to know that just yet. Especially as he had not seen fit to so much as send word he wanted to see either her or their sons.

"Then we will do our best." Lisa promised her, squeezing her shoulders before stepping back to a polite distance. "Now, as the KGB like to tap phones on whims, we need to brainstorm innocuous phrases to hide our real topic. Try not to be squeamish, my dear. Mafia life is not kind."

She gave the older woman a crooked smile. "I did at least know that much before calling you, Miss Primakova."

"Call me Lisa." Soothed the mafia mother with an answering one but then pleasant expression dropped, and she beckoned her eldest daughter forward. "I'd rather not stand on ceremony when it might get in the way, as in now. Let's see what you have to work with while we talk, my dear."

"Some things can be cheated with Sun Flames." Tatiana informed her brightly, sliding on up with what seemed to be a complete doctor's bag full of supplies she pulled out from behind her. "But only after you start on it. It's not really recommended, but as you've had three kids and an almost completely sedentary life so far… I'm going to 'tweak' a few things to make it a tiny bit easier on you to so suddenly change how active you are this late in life."

"Of course," Sonya picked up for her sister in a flatter tone, remaining by the doors and just leaning back against it like a bodyguard would do if this wasn't 'safe' territory, "that's only going to be two weeks in. As someone who had to redevelop the muscle tone after realizing how difficult being a Cloud was on keeping it, be prepared for more of the hell you experienced after chopping down my tree."

"Evenings, then." Fiorella decided firmly, unwilling to give up a full two weeks of minding and raising her sons no matter how much she wanted a better life for herself. "At least until it becomes less 'hellish'."

"You're only an hour behind me, so mornings are for me until you decide otherwise will suit your schedule better." Lisa then informed her, with an understanding smirk for her alarmed look. "The first few weeks will be reviewing what you do know and exploring the possibilities that they also could be, and your progress in figuring out if they are or not. Half this lifestyle is mental, knowing more than someone else or what you can and can't get away with. That you should be able to do even aching somewhat fiercely."

"I'll prescribe a lot of hot baths right now." Chipped in the nurse taking her pulse. "And I know it sounds counter-intuitive, but don't stretch it out in the mornings or anytime you feel stiff. Just keep moving, the soreness will fade over time."
"I can at least help you out with that." Nilda promised, tucking away the piece of sea-glass into a pocket for safe-keeping. "And keep you on track, Fiorella."

"I appreciate it, Nilda dear."

"You realize that your dear Nilda is getting out of the situation, yes?" Inquired her Home Tutor curiously.

"I am a contact for her, favored because she is one of my first, as well as a connection to gain Vongola-centric news. Once I actually learn some." Fiorella defined for her, blinking at the suppressed twitch of lips Lisa had going on. "...or not?"

"You're also a status symbol." She informed her bluntly. "A 'look how trusted I am' to show off to others. You make her look more impressive, being both a contact and a charge to guard."

"Especially when someone finally asks Nono where his wife or sons are." Drawled the Storm-Cloud simply barring the doors for the additional assurance of privacy for her checkup.

"That will be something." Sighed her bodyguard wistfully, a smirk curling up the corners of her lips. "Although, given this I cannot for some time go back to doing what I was for Ottavia. Which isn't much of an imposition, because I'm now married myself and need the time to learn my husband's way of doing things."

"...so, is that why Silvano is so agreeable to watch my sons?"

"The opportunity to become an 'uncle' figure to the next Vongola generation? Possibly the next leaders of your mafia culture here?" Tatiana shrugged absentely, taking out her stethoscope and smiling apologetically as she loosened her shirt for her. "Being trusted to watch baby Skies? Or maybe the guy just really like kids."

"He does really like kids." Nilda confirmed dryly, elegantly draping herself across the back and arm of her sitting chair as she watched everything and everyone. "And to be honest, I still believe Silvano delights in minding your sons just to become that 'uncle' figure he enjoys fully. The influence he first sought in your husband's social circle by marrying me is a bonus, but still a merit your boys have to him that should be accounted for."

Fiorella took in a deep breath, conflicted by that, and oddly her eyes caught on the youngest woman there.

Sonya simply shrugged for her as well. "Keep it in mind but make up your own. Does the other details influence how the situation resolved itself or how much you might appreciate or dislike something?"

...no, no it didn't. Fiorella needed her hands free a few times, her sons did not mind obeying the kind-natured man and she didn't mind because Silvano had proven he would only order something for their safety and care. Specifically desired end-result or not, it would not change anything in those situations to be aware of his motivations.

If the swordsman, and mafia head, wanted to supply a different role-model for her boys she honestly didn't mind. At least, with the relationship he had with his wife however political it was, they'd learn to work with their future partners instead of lying to her face. Swordsmanship also was a fine art to practice, to instill dedication and respect in a practitioner.

With an appreciative smile for her friend, Fiorella turned back to her Tutor and caught an interesting gleam in the older woman's brown eyes. It didn't correlate to the rainbow of colors she had learned to
watch for, and Lisa glanced backwards at her youngest with that somehow highly amused stare.

Sonya pretended ignorance, looking away to stare out one of the tall windows of the Superbi sunroom overlooking a neatly manicured flower garden.

Badly, to the point even she could see through her.

Tatiana snickered, pulling her stethoscope out and hooking it around her neck as she turned back to her bag of medical tricks. "You're not the only one still getting lessons, so don't feel too badly."

"...I didn't even feel that. How did you keep it warm?"

"Darling, I'm a Sun. Like hell I'll have cold equipment."

Fiorella took the nurse's hands in her own, even if that interrupted some of the little time they had with Lisa in the country. "Please. Please, teach that to Brow Nie. I'll do almost anything."

She smirked at her. "We'll see."

"Girls." Interrupted the oldest woman in the room strongly, causing both her daughters to immediately snap to a kind of loose ready stance. "We don't have much time, my flight is in three hours. Quickly now."

"You... are my God damned hero." Nilda breathed out with utter fascination, as Tatiana immediately bent to fetching out a little rubber hammer and Sonya relaxed back against the double doors, slowly drawing up into an almost attentive posture. "Can I be you when I grow up?"

"Nilda... dear? You are grown up."

"Screw that, I want to be her." Insisted the woman, ignoring the ugly look her fellow blonde threw her for that.

Lisa smirked wickedly at Lady Superbi. "No."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 30th of May, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Renato kind of wondered why Sonya had a couch in her bedroom. Not that he was complaining, it was comfortable enough to be suitable and convenient. With the door open he could hear down to the ground floor, most of what went on deeper in the castle, and a little from the floor above, all without so much as needing to move a centimeter.

Of course that opened up the risk of someone hearing him talk, but closing one of the double doors for an hour as he detailed exactly what happened and how it resulted into him all but adopting the boy wasn't much of a sacrifice.

Shamal was sitting on the thief's bed, uncharacteristically silent and just staring blankly down at his own hands. Hopefully the kid was thinking and not just entirely blank, but even if he was the hitman had no idea how to carefully jolt the brat out of it.

He didn't really have a whole lot of time left, half of what he still had to do would have to be done through others or by arranging things to happen 'after'. The Mist brat wasting some of that time
was… kind of suitable for such a tetchy hassle he was, really.

So, he'd make the time for the kid to waste if he felt like it. It was his fault Shamal was orphaned.

Besides, now he was paying attention, the whole being 'muffled' affair was seductively relaxing. Like he stuck his whole head underwater, without the wetness to bother with.

Having spent every second since the ability manifested trying not to pay attention, or specifically trying to blindly focus a skill he barely knew how to use to avoid anything but a specific target in hopes of ducking yet another nagging headache, Renato had very nearly missed how difficult it was to pick up on anyone else's thoughts here. There was 'noise', a usual low-key background distraction he had long since learned to live with, but nothing so specific as words or even clear thoughts.

Sonya, somehow, literally did not think near him. What he picked up from her, mostly unwillingly or specifically clear enough to know she intended him to 'hear' it, was either exactly what she was saying or the minor details that went with whatever topic they couldn't speak aloud about. Rarely, she'd go through every remotely related thought she had on one topic for him to 'focus' upon instead of picking up nearby thoughts in larger crowds. Even more thankfully, her 'mental voice' was as even as her physical one and tended to be non-intrusive if he already had a headache. However she pulled it off, he deeply appreciated it even if the ability probably gave her a few bad habits of her own.

Silence was golden. Renato now only really experienced it when he was unconscious or so far from civilization and animal life nothing living was around for miles. What one of Sonya's Mists was unintentionally doing to him wasn't exactly pure silence, enough emotion behind a thought and he'd still hear it, but it was close enough to an unintelligible something he had learned to reflexively ignore over the last few years to not be nearly as much of a bother.

…he really didn't need another reason to be reluctant to leave.

The best he got to 'controlling' his ability to read minds was focusing it on a single target, which was really just him listening to one line of erratic human thought processes through an entire cacophony of everyone within twenty-five feet of him thinking of dissimilar things about wildly differing subjects all at the same time. Chip in a few non-human thoughts from dogs or cats, which were more feelings that actually easy to understand thoughts, and whatever insects or birds were around to snip a momentary flash of something else on top… and he had been a particularly unpleasant individual to deal with when 'on the road'.

It was getting a little hard to think himself when he was somewhere public, which probably didn't remotely help him avoid more trouble. Not when paired with a nasty headache from a day of just walking through anything from a small village to a large city trying to find this place or that target. As it was, he was paying way too much for Panadol or whatever generic aspirin he could get his hands on without being noticeable at it to fight off the near-constant low-level pain.

Being forced to leave off napping in train compartments for napping in a crowd just for the security from his fellow hitmen also didn't tend to help his mood much.

Napping while on his feet was harder than he expected to learn, and there was the occasional unexpected jolt from whatever mode of transportation to account for. Especially somewhere that, to him, was so 'loud'.

The ability also made him love little old grandmothers traveling to and from this city or that. Shopping lists and their plans for a weekend dinner party were his preferred 'distraction' from the thoughts of those around him. Some of those vastly experienced ladies had amusing 'polite' insults
for the reckless and brash youngsters acting up around them, but only about one in thirty of them would lower themselves to be that petty.

Unfortunate, but true.

"...you... didn't intend to, right Mister Renato?"

Redirecting his attention to the faintly miserable brat on a thief's bed who had apparently finished crying it out, the hitman sighed silently. "I liked your father. Uncomplicated sort, understandable motivations, good information, not really at a decent price but again he had to provide for you and keep away the riff raff bottom feeders. He knew perfectly well that with you the way you were he had to either forge a few contacts so you'd have what you needed to grow up as a Mist or gotten hip deep into our lifestyle. He picked to make the contacts."

Then, because of him, the man hadn't been properly prepared to weather out someone deciding every one of his contacts deserved to die. He didn't deal with the petty crooks and know how to turn them away or avoid them, so he was a sitting duck for something a hell of a lot more lethal barreling his way.

"Aristide Tringali, his name as far as I know brat," Renato informed the child before Shamal could ask the question plastered across his face, even if he only learned the man's name well after the fact, "was well aware it might kill him to deal with the wrong person. Unfortunately, he decided I was a 'right' sort."

The Mist studied him closely, frowning and chewing on his bottom lip distractedly. "What did he do? For you, I mean..."

"...he was a physician by trade. I met him when he offered to extract a bullet out of my back, if I'd explain how you could make a fishnet appear to save yourself from a falling ladder. More often he'd have the sorted rumor take from his region, already weeded out from fake gossip and useless trash, up for sale."

More to the point, Renato very nearly killed the man himself when they met for noticing his Sun Flame use and witnessing his kill. It hadn't been a good night by any measure, the good doctor had been more than a little freaked out by his young toddler's apparent otherworldly skills and a hitman not only killing someone in front of him but apparently 'miraculously' healing an injury over in seconds when he knew the younger man had been injured.

Thus, how Renato knew Aristide had a son in the first place. The physician turned informant was not nearly as incompetent of a caretaker to allow a hitman access to his only child, even if he needed said killer's help sorting out his son's Flame type and what he needed to know about it to raise a Flame user 'right'.

Asking a street-rat Sun probably didn't really help him much, if he was honest about it now. Once he knew what the man was really after the hitman took the pains to inform him of everything he had wanted someone to just tell him and thought that good enough. The information was petty, but good, and he could chip a few extra liras a month the doctor's way when he went past just for being a half-decent sort.

He hadn't met the Mist in person until he belatedly realized the kid's fate wasn't mentioned in the newspaper's report of the 'tragic house fire and death of the local doctor', when he was checking the easier methods to measure how much of his contacts had been eliminated. Figuring out what he needed and then forging things to make him godfather to a baby Mist before the brat was dumped in a civilian orphanage, or worse adopted by a civilian couple, took up all of three hasty days. Leaving
him with little to no time to really plan on what to do with Shamal when he got the brat.

Admittedly, leaving a freshly orphaned Mist Flame using toddler in cramped safe houses or hotel rooms while trying to scramble around and find someone with even half an idea on what to do with a baby Mist was not his best moment.

Dante was running from his own troubles that drove him to eventually take a position in Mafia School to evade it, even if the fussy man was the best of them when it came to dealing with brats, and Cesare was too far away trying to kill a high-profile target at the time to be of any help. Natalia didn’t do children, Renato. No’, and already contracted for Mafia Land work that same month anyways. Lando was not ever child-safe even before he lost a leg, and afterwards he was too damn bitter to put up with a baby Mist even for a little while so he hadn’t bothered asking.

It took him barely a month to run through what was left of his contact network or figure out they were dead, only to end up grasping straws and asking a Soviet Storm-Cloud he already knew had survived to hopefully trade a favor for the help she probably didn’t have for him.

The rest, as they would say, was now history.

Exactly when Renato caught the sound of car door slamming under a particularly too strong thief’s hands, echoing up from the partially cracked open window directly over the front doors downstairs, Shamal slid off the bed and hesitated. Sniffing miserably, and obviously in the mood to be coddled within an inch of his life by his godmother, the brat considered him. Renato stared back, mildly curious and a touch wary.

The child lunged forward, hugged his knee, and smeared a measure of snot all over his pants leg.

Then disappeared in the next second. Given Tatiana’s bewildered exclamation over him outside, he could figure out exactly where the Mist went.

…okay, he might’ve deserved that. He was still slapping the kid upside the head for it later.

The hitman thought about it a moment longer. Maybe tomorrow… he had to take his life in his hands and steal a new pair of slacks from Cesare then send this suit through a dry cleaner.

(Sunday the 31th of May, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Leaving Renato to take Shamal to church this weekend, probably their last Sunday together if what he said about having days left was true and she had years of Sundays to do it herself later, Sonya caught up to the Mirror Lady before she went to bed then waited for the Italians to come back a bit impatiently after reviewing what Usov started on with him.

She got a little distracted last night by how shockingly well the young Mist accepted what his godfather told him, but as Shamal pointed out it wasn’t anything any of them could change now. The hitman didn’t intend for his father to die, then came for him after it happened, and she wasn’t remotely involved at that point. The bratty Mist still loved his father, more now that he knew a few more things about the dead man like braving his Mister Renato in the aftermath of a hit to find him help a civilian couldn’t give, but he loved his godparents too.

Tatiana practically melted to goo, claiming him unfairly cute. Sonya glanced to Renato to see how he
had taken that, but the hitman had decided to not be there at that same moment.

Too bad D'Attilio decided to split the same time as Lisa and Ganauche, only Cesare now had the ammunition to be a massive pain in the Sun's ass for a couple years.

…or not.

Pressing her lips together and closing her eyes, the thief tried not to dwell on that.

If you took that into account, declaring he loved his godfather might be a bit of Misty revenge as well as something he wanted to tell them both. Shamal didn't exactly forget Renato was intending to 'disappear' on them given the fit he threw after learning it, but the kid probably knew things with the hitman present was drawing to a close anyways.

"Miss Bazanova?"

"Larion. Issue?"

"I'm not… really sure." Allowed the Rain thoughtfully, edging further into the second-floor lounge area outside her bedroom. "Um… I… also don't know where to ask or anything."

Sonya opened her eyes just to give the child a raised eyebrow.

"The guy who slept on the floor…"

"Dante D'Attilio."

"Right, him. He said Mists were asked not to warp reality on a whim, and apparently Italians find it rude." Continued the near-teen slowly as he closed the distance between them. "Do you think there's a reason for that?"

"Off the top of my head, I'm more inclined to think it's probably something stupid." With a sigh, the thief pushed herself into a more proper seat than her half-recline on the weird couch wrapped around the support pillar in the middle of the landing. "I can guess it might have something to do with reserving power just in case a hostile Mist gets up to anything in their spheres of responsibility, to prevent too much weirdness from getting out of hand and coming to the attention to civilians, or even like something done as a 'see how well our Flame users behave' kind of shit. Asking me will not clear up the question."

"I don't particularly want to ask him." Larion informed her, running a distracted hand through his short-cropped hair.

That reminded her, brat probably needed a haircut sometime soon.

"He's a staff member of Italy's Flame Academy, they call it Mafia School down here. He'll probably know what's current but will be unhelpful for the why." She tried clarifying something through him once, so the kid would be better suited to ask someone else. "Renato's not chastised the kid for teleporting, but it might be due to Shamal having that conversation with someone before and restricts it to a more 'proper' time and place so he doesn't have to."

"Would the hitman, or even Cesare, know the answer to those kinds of questions?"

"…Cesare's not a Flame user. He might know what's 'socially acceptable' down here, but it's not guaranteed. Renato might be a better bet." Sonya informed him simply, lifting a shoulder when the kid shot her a skeptical look. "Why are you on this?"
"If letting a Mist be a Mist is against 'social norms', for whatever reason or not, what's 'not polite' for Rains?" Questioned the Russian Rain pointedly, nodding once at her huff of realization. "We're not going to spend all our time here, Miss Bazanova. There's going to and from school alone to take into account."

"I never bothered."

"You're a Cloud. I'd like to see who'd dictate terms to you about your abilities." Larion deadpanned, which did make her smirk with amusement.

…well, it was a good question. Learning what was done down here didn't mean they had to do it, and if it was stupid she was going to go out of her way to ensure 'her' Mists were properly informed to always be too 'ornery' to ever behave. Hawk, Verde, Peter, and Galina were all adults, they also could pick what to do once they were informed themselves.

"I'll ask. See me tomorrow or the day after for your answer."

Not questioning who she intended to ask, or why it had to be tomorrow at the earliest for him to get his answer, he just nodded before turning around to continue wherever he had been going before spotting her.

Mists were a headache to deal with… but frankly telling Usov not to do what he was doing never occurred to her when she was helping him. Even afterwards, when Usov was teaching other Mists for her as the section leader for Mists, it still hadn't occurred to her unless he was explicitly doing something to bother her personally. When left alone, Mists did group up to try weirding each other out but tended to take their weirdness to other 'dimensions' those without Mist Flames couldn't perceive.

Sonya could understand not 'allowing' more than five Rains in any one group, they had an explicit example why that was a bad idea to allow. That was practical, more for the benefit of the Flame users involved than for anyone else needing to deal with them. Five Lightnings might not be good for the Lightnings, in learning to deal with the 'slower' Flame types and actually communicating an idea or thought process to another without relying on their own Flame natured lightning-quick comprehension, so she could sort of understand that too.

Too many Storms in one place would never get anything done, they argued way too much. Equally so for too many Suns, that would end up with a marathon race or something as all the Suns got jittery or restless and fed off each other's building up energy. There was a reason Andrei the Sun asked her for ways to burn off that energy when he barely had fifteen Suns to mind, and that was because it was getting to be a serious problem they couldn't stand for long.

More than two Clouds in one spot was probably never going to be recommended, unless another unrelated Cloud was tasked with minding the meeting and keeping things level. More than one Sky… she didn't have that information.

The only Flame type that shouldn't be a problem with were Mists. Admittedly, it wouldn't be nice to be the rare one or two to get caught up in their weirdness insanity fascinations… but it shouldn't be lethal either unless you did something so stupidly sabotaging like panic or insult one to their 'face'.

'Not allowed to warp reality on a whim'…

…it had to be stupid. Mists warping reality was their way of 'practicing' and getting better with their Constructions, melding what they made with what was real then untangling it in various and strange ways to feel out how well their ideas worked. If it was more security than personal comfort bullshit,
then there were better ways to get it.

Like getting another Mist.

Mists weren't the most common Flame type, Rains were, but that didn't mean they were as 'rare' as Clouds or Skies. Usov might be stronger than Anna, but she was pretty damn sure the Mirror Lady had a few tricks for dealing with Mists stronger than her as well as being able to draw on the younger Mist's help if she needed it.

Competitions between two individuals in the art of Construction had to get a bit mind-bending if you were unfortunate enough to watch. If that was the only way Italian Mists could 'express themselves'?

...urg.

Shamal suddenly plopped into her lap, halfway through with divesting himself of the sensible leather loafers she bought him last summer and also probably needed replacement. "Mamma, we're back."

"Ho? I didn't notice." She drawled, earning a snicker from her lapful of godson. Renato was probably the one opening the front door, so she craned her neck to see the brat's face. "I've got to stick close to this place for the summer, but I've got a few books of insects in Greek for us to learn to read and there's probably a trip near the end of summer where we can go do the tourist thing while getting more shoes."

"I want a pair!" Tatiana called up the staircase, either having been on her way past or just emerging from the 'aid station' she was setting up for the coming week's checkups. "Hi tall, dark, and snarky."

Sonya ignored her sister, sinking a hand into the hair behind the brat's head and rubbing a thumb behind his ear. "Is there anything specific you want right now?"

"Are we getting horses?"

"As soon as I figure out a good stable to buy them from. That'll take a bit of research, so probably not for a week or two."

"Going horseback riding would be fun, but I can wait." Shamal informed her blissfully, practically melting into a puddle of goo all over her. Very nearly literally, the little Mist only pulled himself together a bit when the hitman reached the top of the stairs in a less hurried manner. "How about going to the beach?"

"It's less than fifteen minutes away, kid."

Shamal blinked up at her innocently, not quite able to suppress the excited gleam in his eyes. "Exactly!"

"I think Galina's already there." She admitted with amusement. "But you need to eat breakfast first before we go."

The brat cheered with excitement, sliding off her and hitting the floor running. He did at least take the staircase more cautiously, so she didn't care to tell him to do it if he insisted on running everywhere.

"The Mirror Lady just recently finished lacing the whole castle with Mist Flames to 'muffle' any listening devices brought in, choosing not to bother with any espionage attempts directly instead of passively. To get it dismissed as 'just something about the castle' in the minds of any law enforcement agencies who might investigate us." She informed Renato pointedly without moving, she ate earlier
with Anna asking the questions. "Usov reinforced it to prevent second-hand Mist Flames seeking information in the minds of anyone in residence. At the very least, any direct attempts would have to surmount their combined ability. Before that, they'd both know who would be attempting to get in and where they are exactly."

The hitman only paused a split-second, almost obviously engraving that into his mind for later use. "They work together often, or is it an unconscious cross between their efforts?"

"They've worked together for years. Usov taught the Mirror Lady."

Nodding, the man sprawled out on the strange shaped couch with her.

"...you're not coming."

"I have to go. The opportunity coming up is almost perfect for what I intend." Renato admitted for her lowly. "I won't get a cleaner chance, little dragon lady."

Sonya hunched up a little, unhappy and trying to force the uneasy twisting in her guts from making her ill. "...okay."

"That's it?"

"I've said what I'm going to say."

"Probably for the best." Renato looked a little surprised when she decided to sit in his lap, then gave her an amused smirk as he adjusted them both for his comfort. "What's this for?"

"I want to." It was, very probably, the last time she could sit in Renato's lap by her own choice.

(Monday the 1st of June, 1970. Superbi Manse, San Martino, Metropolitan City of Genoa, Italian Republic.)

"Fiorella?"

"Oh, God no."

A bit concerned, she hadn't attended last night's 'first' meeting with Sonya due to a previous commitment and had figured any initial meeting would be the closest to 'light' as can be, Nilda poked her head into the guest room Lady Vongola had taken for her 'vacation'.

The mother of three very weakly flapped a hand at her from the bed. "Go away, Nilda dear..."

"...your sons are in the formal dining room with Silvano." Coaxed the Rain sympathetically, stepping into the bedroom and shutting the door behind her to protect her privacy to feel badly. "Your Tutor has checked in, and-"

"No!" Surging up, only to immediately regret it by the expression of pain that crossed her face, she gingerly rolled/crawled her way off the bed. "No, Nilda. I'll be there in five, apologize to Lisa for me."

"You'll be stretching first." She informed her charge pointedly. "And after a hot bath, you'll have breakfast with your sons. Headmistress Primakova has committed to a post-lunch time call instead
today, due to requirements of her position. She would like me to convey her apologies, but she needs the time to solve it quickly to give you the time you deserve."

There was a pause, and she very nearly face-planted into the bed for a long moment as the tenseness in her back completely relaxed and took any support her movements had to them.

"Tatiana said not to stretch 'it' out." Countered the woman equally as pointedly after she settled a bit, making a face as she finally swung herself upright without too much issue. "She's the nurse."

…interfering with a Tutor's instruction of their student was very much a poor idea, to go along with directly defying a health expert on a subject of health. "I'll call her up and see if she can recommend anything else, then."

"Sonya would like to speak to you as well." Fiorella supplied, taking a moment to gather herself for the mere five meters to the full bath in her en-suite. "About local Flame etiquette."

"...why?"

"Because she has two young Rains in her household, and one of them brought the subject up with her but she doesn't know the answer."

Accepting that, it was entirely understandable motivation and she felt somewhat pleased by the consideration by her fellow Flame users from the Soviet Union, she eyed her charge's sorry state. "What did you do last night?"

"I... mostly learned how to fall 'properly'." Admitted the older mother of three sheepishly, carefully rising to her full height gingerly as various muscle groups protested any movement whatsoever. "Then got to admire the basic ballet moves as Tatiana and Sonya went through a 'basic' routine for me, and a young dear named 'Mingxia' got a bit of intermediate-level instruction in how to walk on one's toes. Then we all stretched. A lot. Excessively."

"I thought you were starting on ballet and not gymnastics?"

"I am." Fiorella confirmed for her wryly as she shuffled more than walked to her room's connected bathroom with a purpose. "But that's me. Sonya, Tatiana, and Mingxia are all already trained in the basics. The older two are advanced ballerinas. They all just took the opportunity to 'borrow' the Mirror Lady's mirrors to double-check their forms. How do you 'borrow' a Mist's Constructed mirrors?"

"Maybe none of them feel like demanding a mirror from a Mist." Nilda would not trust such a thing, unless genuinely offered. Even then, it was a fifty-fifty chance it was a trick instead of an honest offer. "Who's the 'Mirror Lady'?"

"Anna the Mirror Lady. Poor girl is very shy, she barely remained in the room long enough for me to thank. Very proper manners, she curtsied to me upon my arrival and greeted me by my full title." The glass pebble sitting on Fiorella's bedside table gleamed a dark blue for a breathless moment, and after suspiciously staring at it the Rain had to figure it was always probably more than just a fancy Constructed 'door knocker'. "Can you go make sure my sons don't overly bother your husband, Nilda dear? I'll be there in a few minutes!"

"Sure." With one last suspicious look, in which the glass had the gall to sit there innocently, she retraced her steps out of the bedroom.

It was entirely possible Sonya had given 'emergency' instructions to her Mirror Lady under her mother's direction. As Headmistress Primakova said, the Tutoring had to be done over long distance.
Half of why a Mafia Home Tutor went to their students instead of being located in one spot and students brought to them was to protect them personally and adjust lessons to the specific situation they had to struggle against.

While most bodyguards might be insulted someone was looking over their shoulders, she felt relieved to know it. Nilda had the Superbi Famiglia's assistance with her 'job', and some of the CEDEF as well as the Varia of the Sword Emperor's to help her… but they were a distance away at best. Even Sonya was a distance away, if she was entirely out of options.

Now there was a direct link to a rather moody Storm-Cloud sitting on her charge's bedside table, and no one would bother themselves over a bit of pretty glass on their kidnapped 'civilian' as they might for a knife or gun.

How could she get Fiorella to keep it with her at all times?
"First position." Sonya demanded, and Fiorella somewhat awkwardly transitioned from 'third' back to a 'heels together, toes pointed out, arms curved out but held no higher than the sternum nor lower than the navel' and held it somewhat wobbly under the Russian's critical eye.

Tatiana, apparently in use as a non-inverted reference kind of teacher's aide, also moved with Lady Vongola to show what was apparently considered 'proper' in Russian ballet without having to account for the reversed image in the Mist supplied mirrors. Not before nor after, but with. Her movements were indefinitely smoother than the beginner's, but aside correcting how far out Fiorella had positioned her toes the thief ignored that difference.

"Grande pose."

The middle-aged mother of three hesitated, almost moving a foot before one arm moved back but remained curved just slightly over her head and her other stretched out almost shoulder level with fingers pointed so her palm faced the floor. Then she held it, until the blonde pacing around her was satisfied she had recalled and positioned herself correctly.

Nilda watched from her corner a bit curiously, but otherwise bored. As a girl she had been taught ballroom dance, but the instruction of formal dances seemed to suit the same purpose the world over. It was a bit strange that such a strict and practical people chose ballet for a way to impress grace and smooth movement into their criminal girls, ballroom dance might be old-fashioned but it was easier to put into use outside simply keeping fit… unless the ballet was more popular in the Soviet Union than it was anywhere outside of France around here.

Sonya ran Fiorella through the entire 'five' positions of classical Russian ballet, really seven if you counted two of them were arm movements and not full body ones, ten more times each before deciding to give her student a breather.

Which wasn't really much of a breather, it was an opportunity to show Fiorella the next series of 'basic ballet moves' that built off of the positions she was learning. While the woman took in a semi-desperate gulp of water or three to cool off.

Interestingly, the sisters then got a tiny bit distracted playing follow the leader back and forth across the back-hall room just off a set of offices and the far end of the thief's dining hall. The wall of what should've been painted plaster had been turned entirely to a very large mirror, allowing every angle to be seen. Obviously some of those leggy dips, jumps, and mid-air splits were not things Fiorella was going to be able to do any time soon, but even Nilda could see where the 'positions' Lady Vongola had been learning set up this or that smoothly graceful movement.

Her charge sighed, a bit enviously, over her drained water glass. "...I only wish."

"Oh no, these are next." Tatiana brightly informed her, holding out her hands to brace her younger sister's controlled fall as they paused mid-movement and recalled what they were supposed to be doing. "You'll be learning how to move from one position into a spin or plie after you finish with the bare basics. So, about half of that? Your next lesson."

"...although, to be fair, some of those aren't exactly 'beginner' maneuvers." Sonya corrected, utterly
unashamed to realize she might've got carried away.

"Sonya, um... I can't do a split that easily."

"You'll get there."

A bit squeamish and a little intimidated, on top of excited to hear some of those graceful movements were closer to possible than she thought, Fiorella set her glass down and went back to 'her' spot. "I'm ready."

"Fourth position." Sonya demanded, not entirely unkindly, as she separated from her sister to return to instructing as she was tasked to by her mother. "You need to engrave the base positions into your muscle memory and return to them on your own when you complete a routine. Grace will come later, with practice."

"A lot of practice." Admitted the nurse dryly, mirroring the older Italian's movements again with the space given to her. "About when you decide, on your own mind you, to practice in a moment here or there. About a year of that."

"Why ballet?" Nilda interjected as Fiorella got a slight correction to the way she moved her feet. "The popular choice down here is ballroom dance."

"Why not ballet? Ballerinas can mix with any level of social rank almost easily and be accepted as 'supposed to be there' better paired with the 'right' manners and dress." Tatiana tossed to her, still mirroring the change from 'fourth' to 'second' while speaking. "Instead of only be useful when there's a formal event."

...huh, that was a good point.

"And then there's the Russian Ballet." She admitted a tiny bit sourly after a beat and another position change.

Sonya glanced over curiously, while gently pressing a hand under Fiorella's arm to move it into a better position over her head.

"You were a bit distracted at the time. I kind of wanted to join, even got Lisa to take me to an audition, but they said I'd be too fat to be a ballerina just looking at me. So, it was for all of two months."

Her little sister looked rather insulted on her behalf. "Well fuck them then."

Tatiana outright laughed, fully without trying to moderate the noise into something less brash or echoing in this back room. "I'm well over it, Nya. I've been 'acceptable' size to be a ballerina before... you practically hovered over me in worry at the same time, then we blew everything off to take a full month of vacation. It is not healthy to be that thin."

"I'm sorry to hear that, I think you would've made a delightful ballerina." Fiorella attempted to tell her as her form was inspected closely yet again, only to earn a shake of the head and a warm if wry smirk over a tattooed shoulder for the effort.

"Seriously, I'm not remotely sad about it and even back then I knew it was pretty impossible. I've got a much better life now, even better than I would've ever had as a one."

Glancing between her sister and her 'student', the thief very gently pressed a finger to the side of Lady Vongola's shoulder. Surprised, the former-civilian very nearly unbalanced and fell over from
just that little pressure. "I think you're done for the night, Fiorella."

The woman looked to almost want to argue, but when she straightened up to her full height she finally noticed how much her legs were trembling. The momentary water-break hadn't helped her for long, and Nilda honestly agreed with Sonya on how much more Fiorella could realistically do.

"Hug!" Demanded the nurse gleefully, also pulling the older woman out of any possible ballet stance and preventing her from possibly trying to argue with her little sister while she wrapped her arms around her. "Nya's got to speak with Nydia, so let's go see what kind of snack Cesare can whip up for us."

Fiorella was efficiently bustled off for minor healing and feeding before she could muster up a protest or even a word in edgewise, then her temporary instructor then turned to the still invited if not really important guest of hers. "Larion reported to me that D'Attilio claimed Mists are considered rude for warping reality on 'whims'."

"...yes? Don't you have a problem with Mists getting too self-involved in their amusements and 'drifting' off?" Sonya blinked slowly at her, apparently utterly confused, so she cautiously continued. "If you leave a Mist to themselves, they eventually lose 'interest' in the real world and stop responding to any kind of summons. Having a little restraint when it comes to something that might just otherwise harm them is not asking too much."

"Mrs. Silvery-White, I ran an entire organization dedicated to training up Flame users. We all broke off to our own groups before I bought a damn school. The very first Mist I ever trained is here, and he has not shown any 'disinterest' in the real world himself."

"He's equally as young as 'Larion the Rain', isn't he?" Nilda questioned shrewdly, shrugging when the Russian cautiously nodded. "Let's revisit that conversation after you suffer through his 'puberty' issues, and you'll see what I-"

"Mrs. Silvery-White. The oldest Mist we had is thirty." Sonya pointed out with little patience, for what did on second thought came out a little more condescending than she had any right to. "The Mirror Lady is past that point of puberty and is equally and more suited to be called 'disinterested' in the real world. She has not 'drifted off' yet, nor has the 'oldest' Mist in Moscow."

Nilda opened her mouth then froze, wondering why the hell she was so opinionated on something that had nothing to do with her. Slowly closing her mouth, the Rain rethought what she had been about to thoughtlessly say.

…to the former head of a mafia school, the daughter of a current one, about the nature of Flame users, which she never remotely 'studied' herself. "It's... recorded. At Mafia School, they kept track of this for about a century now. Generally, when Mists got a little too Construction-happy they start disappearing. No word or explanation given, aside some stupid claim about a boogeyman from other and better mannered Mists."

The Storm-Cloud, instead of dismissing that ridiculous claim as most would hearing it, cocked an eyebrow at her pointedly.

Already uneasy by a thoughtless habit she only just realized may not be helping her any, the Rain hesitated a moment before responding cautiously. "What?"

"Mists. Construct. At will. Enough wide-spread total belief in one rumor, and they'd cause the exact same thing you insist is going on by accident. Even then, why the hell would you dismiss the idea that a stronger Mist is culling your Mists for their own aims? Out of hand, even? Why not just cut
their throats outright and spare them the strain of holding up your damn 'expectations' instead?"

Ignoring that sarcastic tidbit at the end, because if the sudden niggling suspicion she had was right then the thief was entirely in the right to call all Italians out on that, she thought about it. Then couldn't, for the life of her, figure out why the hell she never cottoned on herself.

Or ever bothered to look into it, when she was one of a handful of agents Ottavia used to keep things running smoothly even if it wasn't expressly 'Vongola' centric?

"...over an entire century? The same boogeyman?"

"If it didn't exist at the time, enough widespread belief of young Mists would've Constructed a real one by now. Immortal, 'unbeatable', whatever." Something lightning-quick but disturbingly pastel shaded flickered in the woman's grey eyes, but it was gone in a blink and the blanked expression did not invite further questioning into the topic.

Nilda made a face at the thought that should stop her, but also made tentative plans to at the very least look into the situation for once instead of running her mouth about an issue she didn't know a lot about. "I'll call up the school and see if they won't provide you the information under a hopeful understanding of ensuring things are as we thought them to be when matched against other experiences. Then again, there's still a valid point in how long they've been in existence against how long yours have been."

She huffed, but shrugged, so the platinum-blond assumed her fellow blonde would let that stand so long as it was. "What about Rains?"

Even if this part did involve her, she still very cautiously reviewed what she would say before saying it. "Less complicated for our own good. In hopes of avoiding yet another Mafia War, keeping discussions or arguments contained to the group starting it is generally considered being polite. Drenching an entire room in Tranquility is considered rude, as is putting to sleep anyone a Rain might dislike without provocation."

Sonya eyed her skeptically. "...I'll pass it on."

Oh dear. "You do know what the Mafia Wars were, right?"

"Your version of the Bitch Wars, just less contained? Yes."

…the what?

(Tuesday the 2nd of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Adrik, with a very pointedly bland expression, set a smaller than the usual crate on their table.

The fact said too small to be books crate was whimpering and something scuffled inside under its own power was a bit of a giveaway for what it was holding this time. She didn't even need to look at the return address to know it was probably an Italian one and not marked as coming from Mafia Land per the usual shipments they got.

Sonya seized Shamal by the back of his shirt before he could lunge over not only his breakfast but her own and crawl over the table to claim his long-awaited puppy. "Just the box?"
"Just the box." Confirmed the man with a shrug. "Were you expecting anything else?"

"Not particularly," eyeing the rustling box a bit warily, she glanced to the empty seat Anna would've sat at if she was still awake enough for breakfast, "Shamal, finish your breakfast first. They'll wait a moment or three for you to have the energy to play with them all morning."

Usov might not need the time but then again, he might. This was also assuming the Mirror Lady informed him about the concerns she had about if the dogs would react adversely to Shamal's gifts.

The wounded look the child shot at her was met with bland silence, and very reluctantly to the point anyone glancing at them would understand he was doing this under full protest, the Mist went back to eating achingly slowly. Adrik huffed in amusement, trading off a bump of forearms with his previous gang leader as he sought out his own breakfast but scowled when he realized Verde wasn't there.

Her brat's choice of 'protest' would just delay taking possession of his new pet that much longer. She didn't quite get why he chose to 'protest' this way, because it didn't seem very smart, but at least he was eating as she asked. Slowly instead of quickly, which was a preferable alternative actually. Then was it as 'smart' protest?

Tatiana curiously poked her finger into one of the air-holes, yanking back all of a sudden with a bemused expression and a nipped finger. "Baby animals?"

"Puppies." She confirmed dryly. "On your runs, did you happen to spot a pet shop?"

A warm smirk crossed her lips, and the nurse nodded. "Yeah, I can take you two after breakfast."

"Might want to plan for a bit later than that." Sonya offered dryly, as Shamal dropped his utensils to his 'empty' plate and leapt up to the table to get his long-awaited puppy.

"Mamma! Come on, open it up!"

"Can't you do it?" Her sister objected mildly, poking him at the stomach to get the Mist to back off a little.

Sonya just lingered another second until Usov waved to show he was standing by as Anna promised for them. Probably meant he was fully aware and may or may not have needed the time, but regardless.

"I'm too excited, zia. I might hurt them." Her brat announced, waving both hands in his excitement. He pressed his palms together and sat his butt down right in the middle of the table as she got to her feet. "They're puppies, you have to be careful."

Summoning one of her golden axes, she 'carefully' slid it into the crack between two slabs of thin wood and pried the back edge up carefully to pull the wood free in spite of the nails trying to hold it all together.

In a nest of hay and dotted with tiny fragments of dried out plant matter, were the two puppies Renato promised. After a second, she had to admit they were either way too young or probably true mongrels as they stirred in response to the change in light levels.

Neither of the two had any distinctive marks of any of the majorly popular dog breeds she knew of. Admittedly, they were tiny fluff balls way too young to show much but puppy fat and healthy fur coats so that might change in as little as half a year.
One was darker than the other, with a kind of cow splotch-coat with black and brown, with a white belly and three white socks. There was even an underside of white around the short muzzle, which licked up the jowls of the animal back to the throat and up until right under the dark brown eyes. The other had a grey and brown dappled off-white coat, one blue eye and the other brown, and paws a little larger than its littermate's to the point of being comically oversized.

Shamal very nearly kicked his aunt's breakfast off the table trying to see into the crate too once she pulled the lid away from the crate, then knelt in mid-air instead of risk the Sun's retribution for ruining her meal. One animal, the darker one, tried to turn its head to look at him but fell over the paler puppy trying.

Curiously, the paler puppy hunched down into the hay with an edge of startled surprise. Even if it had shown curiosity of her for prying open its little den, apparently her brat was not something it was comfortable or equally curious with.

Of course, by now, everyone left in the dining room were aware there were small animals in the room. Cesare and Ruslana had emerged from the kitchen to watch, Hawk was giving the show half his eye while he kept on eating with Adrik doing the same, and Usov's distraction had drawn his parents to the same subject.

Tatiana reached in and scooped out the darker puppy, checking the gender curiously before handing it over to the awed little Mist it would probably go to as it was significantly less wary of him than the other. The pale pup scrabbled at the hay a little when she pulled it out, but oversized paws meant it not only failed horribly but ended up pulling a mess of plant matter out with it.

"They're both males." Reported the nurse, rolling the puppy over again as he seemed to really want and trying to nip her fingers to accomplish. "Cute, though."

She pouted heavily but did obligingly hand over the other puppy when Sonya gestured for him.

The handful of fluff didn't look any more reassured to be held by a Storm-Cloud than he did to be peered at curiously by a Mist but seemed to deem her the lesser of two evils after a moment. Meaning, the animal started slowly licking her wrist and then tried to fit his short muzzle around it for some reason.

Shamal's puppy had already gone to town on any exposed inch of skin he could reach, and the brat plus canine were rolling around the air while the child was giggling his brunette head off.

Usov turned back to his breakfast, and apparently deeming his involvement over with.

Glancing at the puppy in her hand, who had the gall to yawn in her face next and give her a good whiff of puppy morning breath, she wondered if Renato had gotten them at least a mix-breed of dog that would fit in a purse or something.

Otherwise traveling with the mutt would be interesting.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 2nd of June, 1970 continued. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Shamal was wearing his new pet like a hat. The streaks of white and dark-almost-black fur mixed in with brown hair made it apparent there was something not quite right, but it did take a second look to understand the napping puppy wasn't actually part of the boy.
Kid was way too adorable, he really needed to stop before Tatiana spontaneously combusted into spinelessness. Well, more than she already had. This whole summer would do nothing for her reputation, but at least it was probably going to be 'kept in the family'.

Sonya, on the other hand, held her puppy at arm's length. There was a moment when her little sister very nearly put the animal into her purse, but after a silent moment of contemplation she apparently decided putting a baby canine into something she held important items within was a poor choice.

Which she had to agree with, little baby animals weren't exactly trained to not piss all over everything when they had to go.

She could at least hug the poor thing… or maybe not. Actually holding a fragile young creature was honestly rather sweet of her stupidly strong baby sister, as well as the more realistic way to contain an animal without risking it's life negligently.

Well, either way, they were here. "This is it. Actually, I think it's the only pet shop in this place."

It wasn't a big place, a mom and pop corner store more than anything. That wasn't necessarily bad, because the pups didn't need anything more than the basics right now.

The younger thief snagged her brat before he could walk right in, offering the sleepy puppy in her hand to her. "Can you watch them a second, Tats? Just so I don't leave him on a shelf thoughtlessly, or him making a mess on the floor."

Shamal didn't think that was a remote possibility and pouted valiantly up at his godmother.

"Just for now. You'll probably want the freedom of movement to pick out things for him without needing to worry, and we can send the shopping back with Tats and find a park to… play with them in afterwards. They also might need a… um, patch of grass about now."

Managing a sweetly sympathetic smile for the kid, because he was still pouting outrageously, she accepted the other young puppy. Then, once the two of them were inside, Tatiana lifted both puppies to her face and snuggled with them.

Because puppies!

Soft baby animal fur!

Cute little canines… with wet noses and a propensity of licking everything to death, but that wasn't exactly a drawback.

"…squee."

Okay, she might want to find them a tree or something then cuddle the puppies more.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 2nd of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

There wasn't really a 'dog' park in Moneglia, but Sonya had more than enough space to let the animals run to their little hearts' content in her own damn grounds. Shamal was playing with his newly named and collared 'Marco' puppy, getting chased around the corner of the castle grounds right next to the still empty stables on the other side of the drive from the construction efforts working on mostly finished houses.
She kind of thought Shamal’s puppy was a little... thick. Or overly friendly, perhaps. It might’ve been whatever Usov did to ensure Marco didn't react the same way as his littermate did to the younger Mist, or just the pup being too overly excited to be wary by nature. She'd ask later, just to keep track what happened to them.

Tatiana, having argued about letting the puppies get some activity in while handing them back over to them probably just so she didn't have to take the shopping back herself and miss out on small baby animal antics, was equally as gleefully chasing her own 'Alek' around since that puppy was a hell of a lot warier of the Mist child than the other dog.

No, Sonya wasn't particularly imaginative. Naming the puppy after old vor Aleksandr was more to do with giving a respectful nod to her deceased combat instructor than on the canine's own merit, but the old grumpy git probably would've been pissed to have a dog named after him. Therefore every other vory would've enjoyed the fuck out of it, and harassed the old man into giving each one of them a smack to the mouth he would have enjoyed more than being a namesake for a dog.

Hence it was a perfectly suitable name, if still rather unimaginative.

She leafed through the dog training manual she picked up, having bought it to know what was 'accepted' to do for canines as well as a general one overviewing popular dog breeds to identify some of what blood was in the animals when they developed into being more than possibly medium-long haired fluff balls.

…a puppy was piss-poor compensation for losing a friend. Admittedly it wasn't fair to Alek to think of him that way, but frankly if it was between the dog or Renato she'd pick the hitman.

The Sun was at least marginally house-broken already, these animals needed to be trained up for that.

Then again, she demanded the puppy herself in recompense for him 'playing dead'.

Galina, still in a swimsuit with a towel knotted around her generous hips and with salt-drenched hair for once loose about her shoulders and spilling down her back freely, slid next to her on the stone bench moved from an overlook patio in the back acre until the railings back there were either inspected or replaced for safety reasons. "I'm now officially bored of the beach."

"I need you to figure out a non-insulting way to hook Verde up to a timer, so he'll actually eat and not irritate Adrik every damn morning. Then figure out if there is such a thing as a Flame-user friendly horse farm nearby we can get a few older mares from." Sonya turned the page, reading further into various methods to train a younger dog in how not to chew on things. "Then, if you'd like to turn your cosmetics into an actual 'Flame user's makeup line', you're going to need several different types of makeup and nail polishes for all types of women. Peter and Verde are apparently getting a head start on figuring out the why and how for the rocks working as they do you can contribute to."

"And now I'm no longer officially bored of the beach." Observed the Lightning wickedly with arch amusement lacing her tone, hooking one leg over her other knee and admiring her brand-new tan. "Any further marching orders?"

"I think you might need a mouthpiece." Admitted the thief slowly, laying a finger over a line of text to return to after this conversation. "An Italian, so we don't have to continually do the 'yes, we're Russian and no, we're not trying anything shifty' every damn time we contact a civilian establishment. Even Afanasii’s getting tired of it."

"The cook won't do it?"
"Cesare's a Mafioso, and an assassin, who's got his own thing to do sometimes. He's also a chef, not a cook, and while he could entirely be willing to supply a 'native' accent now or again..."

Galina hummed thoughtfully, contemplating something. "I take it that's why I've got a few resumes on what passes for the 'bedside table' in my room."

"We also need maids," if only to keep Mingxia from trying to clean the entire castle with Ruslana, "and aside a stable-hand or whoever takes care of horses I need probably two cars, one for getting from point A to B now and later on probably something 'impressive'. Afanasii's likely to become the general handyman and driver. He might need a license done up soon, but I'd like to get a few gardeners as well."

She pursed her lips for a moment, glancing to aside where Tatiana had 'rescued' her puppy from a nest of dying or dead vines he fell into due to his oversized paws and was cooing at him sympathetically. "Noted."

"And then, if you run out of something to do, I've got three books for you to either translate or 'suitably hippy-fie' for publication. The original hippy book, a second volume, and a history text for Lisa that will probably need less work."

"Trying to keep from getting that zoo?" Inquired the other woman just a touch archly, green eyes gleaming with her Flames. "May I point out you've already got two dogs and are planning on horses to boot?"

"Galina. Shut up." Sonya snapped half-heartedly, accepting a panting and squirming Alek from Tatiana. Her puppy looked rather curious of the other woman for all of two seconds, before deciding flopping down and take a nap on her lap was the better option. "Shamal! We need to go set up their stuff, and Marco probably needs some water and a nap. They're young still, so he can't play hours on hours with you."

"Aww..." Her brat came to an obedient halt, which his puppy hadn't been expecting. Marco ran into the back of his leg with a surprised yelp and ended up nose-to-knee on her kid until the Mist untangled the two of them.

"Cesare's taken possession of the kibble, with a very strange expression on his face. He also asked if there wouldn't happen to be any dog food cookbooks, so he doesn't have to serve the mutts 'mass-produced dross'." Reported the nurse, itching something on the back of her calf with her other foot idly. "But I guess since he doesn't know one himself, he's probably adding 'two bowls of kibble' to the meal plans and there'll be something for them to eat at lunch with us."

"I suppose I don't actually need to ask him if he'll keep the bones of whatever meat cuts he gets?"

"He's got six soup bones from whatever fresh-made stock already waiting for them to gnaw on, they might just need to cool a bit, and I think he's making plans to mock up treats for them for you to train them with. As soon as he gets an idea what dogs need more rather than humans."

Alek, either somehow knowing food was being discussed or just for the hell of it, pawed her stomach and whimpered-whined that he needed something at her as if she could understand that.

A call taken up by his brother, as he belatedly recalled either a lack of food since being shipped or how long since they ate whatever they had been sent along with in their crate. Or just for the hell of it. Marco didn't immediately wander off to find a suitable patch of grass, so it probably wasn't to ask somewhere to relieve himself at.

"...I would've know that would happen, and I just grew up near her." Nicolai chipped in, not exactly thoughtfully but something utterly dry and tart anyways.

Vor Arseniy grunted moodily. Apparently, he kind of wasn't satisfied by how that mess of a disaster ended between his youngest daughter and the new Pahkan Gedeon.

The fact that did need additional clarification, the younger daughter instead of the youngest, because somehow the man was minding a damn toddler for his lover?

Was about equally as jarring as everything else he learned today, and it had been hours since he got shoved out of a jail cell.

…the worst the Rain had expected to come back to was a highly pissed off Galina, and her completely missing meant he had to actually learn the process for what paperwork there was himself again. Once Sonya liberated him for a night, he then added a highly upset Zarya and Kazimir to his expectations… that weren't entirely met. Irinei was just too cautious to be equally as invested as his fellow Rains in anything that harmed him, as Fadei might've done by the end if the thief had to default to what he knew at the time instead of waiting for him to get out.

To be fair, Zarya was highly upset and very nearly delayed this entire conversation. She couldn't quite talk her way into a very only meeting, small blessing that it was, and so he had to probably deal with that next moment vor Arseniy deemed them done talking. Kazimir was missing in action compared to the other two, but according to the older man he was serving seven to ten for murder and not because of anything else.

Irinei not serving time himself was actually kind of odd. Dmitriy kind of understood getting delayed on the whole 'Flame training' needs, but with an entire schoolhouse now he should have the freedom to either get on that or figure out something else to do with his life. Or maybe he had found something different for himself…

"So… Lisa's in charge of training the brats up now." That wasn't a half-bad idea. Dmitriy actually liked it, because he sure as hell had little to no idea how to train up even his own Flame type into competent users of Tranquility. "Alright. Suppose then we need to do recruiting. That's… better than fine, she's a hell of a lot better at training than I am."

"...you're not going to address the small blood feud Sonya's got going on with our Pahkan?"

Inquired Nicolai curiously.

"Are you remotely surprised?" He shot back, rubbing a slightly tattooed hand against his face before turning his attention to what might've changed in the office since the last time he saw it. "So, no. Old ground, probably going to involve more blood and screaming in short order the moment she's got an opening, and we all probably have at least a suspicion where that's going to end. A better topic is if she's utterly against any Zolotovs entirely or just Gedeon."

Both of them stared at him with vastly different expressions. Arseniy patiently, which he highly doubted the vor actually felt and was probably more in line with suspiciously, and Nicolai curiously.
"I tried teaching others. I horrifically fucked up. Moving on. She's probably not going to stop figuring things out when it comes to Flames, I don't see a reason why she'd refrain from poking holes and questioning things like the little busybody she really is for something as small as moving countries. Can I keep on her good side, and get some of that, or is she going to refuse because it might help the Pahkan and not just me?"

"Why the hell would you bother? I get the girl's a bit freakishly terrifying, I've watched her cave in concrete and treat the broken hand that resulted about the same as I would a twisted ankle. That doesn't mean she's right, always. Nor thinking clearly, because some of that was outright petty and not something a savvy thief would do."

A quick glance, Vor Arseniy was keeping a blank glower on his features instead of outright disprove someone talking about one of his foster daughters, and the Rain gestured out the window to the still unseen schoolhouse he had only been just informed of. "Sonya's not the best talker. That'll probably never change, she's just not great with people. So yes, petty and rude might just define her entirely when she's pissed off and that hasn't seemed to change the last few years. When she's not feeling petty and irritated is the point. She started this shit and taught me, her sister, a handful others, and kept us on the edge of things so we weren't drowning in excess Flame brats. So what if she's not the best to shove into this office? She's still probably the best asset I've got access to in order to keep things moving and improving over anyone else with two ideas to rub together and half a thought on how to get here."

Nicolai lifted a shoulder, apparently having protested just for the hell of things and not because he had a point behind it. "Suppose you'll just have to ask."

"Why don't you ask? That way, when she kicks you in the balls, you can know it's for whatever Tatiana dumped you for or if it's because you're a Zolotov."

The older man cracked a laugh, honestly outright amused and almost shockingly loud about it. Once, but that once was attention-grabbing enough.

Narrowing his eyes, apparently not appreciating that particular hit below the belt, the younger Vor flipped him off. "Do your own damn dirty work, jackass."

"Nicolai." Arseniy grunted, apparently deciding he was done with this entire situation and had better things to do. To be fair, the brat he was minding had woken up and was groggily tugging on his shirt demandingly. "I had something Lisa wanted. It's why she came back. What, the fuck, do you have for Tatiana?"

Dmitriy ignored the vaguely irritated response that parting shot the older Vor earned, glancing around the office for any further changes. The touches of green Galina shoved into the office to spare her eyes from all the blue, which to be frank he liked well before a bit of purple sapphire was all but chucked at his head, were still there. He hadn't memorized the books and random crap stacked into that built-in shelf but, given who had been using the office while he was in jail, he was pretty sure none of it was in the same spot it had been before.

…where did his lamp go?

He left it here, right?

"…Dmitriy." Zarya demanded from the doorway, the very moment the older man passed her with the brat cradled like a ball under an arm. "Do you now have the time for me?"

"Go grab Irinei. I'm going to have to have this conversation twice," around when he got a more than
likely observed timeslot to see Kazimir, "but you could've told vor Arseniy you needed a moment before him had you wanted."

The red-eyed Rain was not amused at his wit. "You don't seem all that concerned that your student got his ticket punched by that bitch."

"...to be clear, I was fully expecting that. Before I went to jail. Fadei kind of went off the deep end, then met something a hell of a lot more immovable than me... which he promptly rammed his head into until he snuffed it. Surprise." Pulling over a half-filled journal, which was mostly filled out with Galina's neat script and had a few scribbles here or there he could either label as Sonya's or Arseniy's handwriting, he found the passage he had been lingering over before the older vor came in to detail what hadn't been safe enough to record down somewhere. "What I'd like to know is why the ever loving fuck this Larion the Rain kid was not only blackmailed to try to kill Sonya, but then he got the position you three should've been holding down."

A change in subject, yes. He didn't want to get into the Fadei situation, it was partially his fault after all. He didn't stick it out and try to help the boy, but between an apparent new Flame-user centric risk that came with those damned Skies and Gedeon somewhat thoughtlessly agreeing to distribute the basics of Flame user information they had instead of risk a significant dust up... there wasn't a whole lot he could've done for either situation without utterly ruining the other by his own choice.

"She dismissed us." She informed him as if that wasn't recorded, and the reason why the Lightning got out of the thief, as the other vor decided to leave him to his work and took himself off past her too.

"Yeah. That." Dmitriy let the hard-back book fall shut and slammed a fist on top of it. "Surprise number two, which really shouldn't have been a damn surprise. She didn't like you impressing your views on how to use Tranquility over the brats. Which, even more surprise, I didn't do to your four either."

"No one said anything before she got a burr up her ass about it!"

"You should've asked!" He barked back at her.

Zarya threw up her hands in exasperation. "She said to train them as you did us. That was what we were told!"

"I didn't dictate what you could or couldn't do, I just helped you figure out what you could do." Refuted the older Rain irritably. "So I guess asking how she trained me was utterly out of the question too, even if I copied her in the first fucking place? Which was 'give the basics, let them develop themselves, and stand by for questions or concerns'. You got one out of three done, I have issues how you lot handled the rest."

"Is that it? The bitch killed your first student and it's not worth a mention? No, instead we're going to get bitched out for not knowing what we weren't told?"

"No. The bitch I had to ask to clean up after my first student's massive fuck up, you lot are going to be bitched out for doing the exact opposite of being Tranquility users and making a massive fucking mess of everything that requires being cleaned up in the first damn place!"

The look she leveled at him was pretty much the exact opposite of calm and level-headed, pissed off and utterly infuriated might've covered it, and after a moment she slammed his office door behind her.
…'the bitch'. Sonya might've been flattered to be so titled.

Dmitriy rubbed his face tiredly, leaning back into the office chair he had half-expected to be stolen from him before he got back here. Frankly, he just wanted to know where the hell his lamp ran off to and maybe a good night's sleep before yet another fucking trip of a conversation.

Pity he couldn't figure out a way to be immediately sent back to jail without risking his own murder. Either from the Zolotovs for fucking about when he had other responsibilities, or Sonya when she had to figure out how to prevent someone from giving her mother a migraine second-hand due to him ducking out of the position she practically handed over to him on a silver platter.

(Friday the 5th of June, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Renato paused, lifting his left shoe slightly to see what the hell he had stepped on.

Apparently, it was a half-finished and heavily creased page of a letter attempting valiantly to blend in with the cream carpeting.

Coyote's voice through the open doors told him more than enough why there were pages of paper littering his office floor in various states of abuse. "Nono, not that I think your current aim is an entirely wrong step, but do you think actually sending the letter would help you more than crumpling them up and tossing them over a shoulder?"

Not all of them were so simply discarded, the one the hitman stepped on had survived its use with only brash strokes of black through the written words on the side oh so conveniently not facing him. Scooping up a handful near the open door, a touch awkwardly due to half of the very reason he had to come back here first and waste a few more hours he had left as himself, he fully entered the office just in time to see Timoteo nailing his Storm Guardian with a short and very irritable glare.

"Lose something, Nono?" Renato asked, fanning the sheaf of papers at the mafia Don idly. He handed them over when the Sky rather impatiently gestured for them, lingering even as the older man tried to order the mess on his desk into some kind of sense.

The Sun glanced at the Storm, who simply hitched up a shoulder in irritation.

"Coyote, I'm going to need an envelope." Timoteo informed his right-hand Mafioso and oldest friend, while a few more sheets of paper were discarded rather carelessly to an already overfilled wastebasket set next to his desk awaiting the Storm to dispose of anything remotely sensitive. "And... perhaps more paper. Can you catch a footman from the door?"

As his Guardian moved to do so, Don Vongola somewhat exhaustedly eyed the hitman standing before his desk.

"I take it that it's time?"

The smirk that he slapped across his face was probably a bit painfully faked, but he couldn't really put more effort into it without making things worse himself. "About it, yes."

"...are you sure you don't want Croquant Bouche's help?" Pressed the man after a silent moment to absorb the news, obviously doubting anything could affect his Mist Guardian's memory of who his Sky interacted with often enough over the last few years.
"I've found something that will work for the harder issues," a very expensive something that damn near killed him to afford alone without accounting for the rest of his current issues, "not that I would intentionally doubt your man to your face, Nono."

"Of course you wouldn't." He observed just a touch tartly, which to be fair he probably heard more than enough of what everyone else thought of the situation between him and his wife by everyone remotely involved or even informed. "Come see me when you're done, Renato. I just might have a few jobs for you."

With a careful tip of his brim, which removed it from his head but that had to happen, the hitman turned on a heel and left the Sky to his somewhat procrastinated attempt to write his wife a ‘suitable’ letter. In the hallway and thankfully with the Storm Guardian distracting the help, Renato pulled the baby chameleon off the back of his hat mostly to keep the creature more or less hidden on his way out.

Baby Leon immediately scrambled for his shirt cuff, hiding out there in a warm crevasse of fabric and skin instead of remaining on his palm in such an open place. Suited him just fine, so he didn't then immediately scoop the creature out of there too in spite of how uncomfortable it was to be the chameleon's climbing perch.

…if Shamal hadn't nagged Sonya to buy the hat for him, he could've kept it. More than enough of Vongola's staff knew perfectly well who got him it, even if they managed to keep Shamal under wraps through four years he didn't expect something as random as a birthday gift to be treated with the same closed-mouth care as a young child's mere existence. Against his best attempts there were a couple characteristic damages that made it identifiable, so ditching the gift was his only recourse.

Hopefully in a way that if Shamal wanted it he could then have it. Sonya was probably going to punch him in the mouth for that plan, but… fair enough.

The possibility anyone knew precisely what damage he had been unable to prevent happening to it to the point they could track backwards and know another Soft Sun using hitman named Renato once wore expressly this mass of shaped felt being vastly unlikely or not, he still wasn't going to keep this exact hat. He wasn't exactly in the mood to gamble any at this point, given the new gunshot hole through the brim was earned not five hours ago.

He was going to replace it, probably with another fedora just because he was used to one. Something to shade his eyes and play with to freak out a few civilians refusing to accept the darkly dressed Mafioso was too dangerous to get close to was a useful accessory. He had tried a trilby, and a homburg, due to various disguise reasons… and found he preferred actually having a usable brim to whatever hat he wore.

The tetchy Leon squirmed against his wrist, but as long as he held his hat in hand the chameleon had little reason to attempt digging baby lizard claws into his skin instead of fabric.

The nice thing about 'legally dying' was that if Renato took out a damn loan from some civilian establishment he didn't have to bother about paying it back. Bank fraud would be the least of his worries if this gambit failed, so frankly there was no reason to not stack the deck just a tiny bit more in his favor if he could.

Might also add, just a tiny bit, to the credibility of having money or contract issues. Not bothering with any banks that had the criminal connections to be aware of the real backgrounds of their clients was one thing, aside rare and a bit bewildering option to go for since they were more susceptible to Sonya's fellow thieves to hit up when they were low on cash or being a pasty for another and better-connected bank.
...the only problem he had with that plan was somehow not getting the account he set up to help pay for Shamal's future schooling for the next three years billed with a loan.

Now, would arranging for a temporary identity to pull a loan from a civilian bank reflect something he didn't want his fellow hitmen and a handful of assassins to pick up on or not?

Renato cupped his fingers in a slightly awkward way for Leon to fall into if the baby lizard couldn't stay in place where the tiny creature wanted to be, but also replaced his hat as he reached the main foyer of the Iron Fort.

The moment he got outside of Vongola's headquarters he'd figure out how to use the insects in the box in his pocket to feed the creature. Probably by releasing half the contents to fuck about and do whatever it was Shamal made them to expressly do for Leon, which would hopefully feed the dratted thing without his direct involvement being needed more than once or twice a week.

Hopefully Sonya got the return 'gift' for this headache by now, as she did have a heavy hand in sticking him with baby lizard complications.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 5th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Verde wearily eyed the child slumped against the edge of the tub. "Again?"

The young Mist jerked, very nearly slid sideways to the tiled floors of their shared bathroom, and aimed a grumpy glower up at him. "Mister Verde..."

"If you chose to occupy a common room between our respective ones, then yes I will repeatedly interrupt your... vigil." The even younger animal he was tending was resting, within the adequately sized to contain and easily cleaned option there was to be had until such time as the animal could go the night without needing to relieve itself. Himself, as the child would insist. "What remote purpose does staring blankly at the... at your pet hold?"

"Marco's a baby." Shamal informed him, as if that had not been established by the sheer appearance the animal had nor bantered about for the lack of any other progress in establishing the castle as a livable location. "He needs supervision."

"Marco is a young canine. He's weaned from his dam. More likely your pet is around the same development stage as you yourself are at." Verde ran some lukewarm water over a wrist where an unfortunate pen objected to his unconscious use of Hardening and exploded ink over him in protest. "Aside which, as he is sleeping you yourself require rest for proper growth."

He perfectly understood the irony in him stating such to the child, given it was close to midnight and he was also still awake attempting to match some of the elements his studies attributed to certain glassy mineral formations to narrow down which Flame type should prefer it in others.

Which, given what results were recorded from an empirically testing methods, did not uniformly match with what his notes would suggest. There was always simply human error, or the will to utilize a result against what natural ability it should have, and therefore carefully picking through the information he had just been allowed access to...

...which technically was not the project he had been tasked with doing.

The Lightning glanced back over a shoulder and the child still on his knees against the bathtub.
"Shamal."

His response was undeniably sulky and irritated. "What?"

Another second to take in the situation, unneeded as nothing had changed since the first glance he took of it, and he reached down and snagged the child by the back of his shirt. "I have questions, in return for answers I will not inform your mother of your late-night antics these past few days."

"Hey!"

A touch of Hardening, actually intentionally used on the cloth, kept the young Mist from simply sliding out of his grip like so much smoke.

Adrik had found, either innocently through the local wares being sold or by other means, a decently serviceable chess table for him. In hopes it might prevent Verde's boredom from getting the better of him yet again and further a project before he continued well past what the Russian could keep up with. A gambit that failed rather resoundingly, due to a lack of any willing opponents of any type in the rare occasions he had the time to contemplate challenging someone to a game.

Shamal was carefully placed on the makeshift seating behind the set up white pieces, regardless if Verde could or could not use it the game table and pieces were still a gift he did appreciate, and he took the black side. "Now then, there are notes provided to ensure I understand the process that resulted in the Mirror Lady's Pavuchky."

"Who's Pavuchky?" Inquired the child, more than a little snottily for the interruption of his frankly useless vigil.

Verde tapped the window he had set up the game table under. "Mirror Lady, young Shamal has not met your Pavuchky."

"I don't normally let him out in hours young Master Shamal is awake." The older Mist defended herself, with less attitude than her fellow, through the poor reflection the glass provided. In the next second a vibrantly striped spider leg poked out of the window, and Pavuchky itself delicately pulled the rest of the colorful thorax that characterized the massive orb weaver through to obediently show itself obediently as its mistress' desired.

Staring blankly at the end-result of his initial experimentation for a full second, the young child glanced at him in askance. "I made this?"

"Indeed. The end result of your control experiment, unfortunately due to changing the base makeup of the creature it required."

"He required, Master Verde."

…spare him from overly attached pet owners. "He required something that his diet was not prepared to sustain. Meaning, to find more Dying Will Flames to support his existence, he cannibalized the others in his experimentation group."

Making a particularly unpleasant face, although this time it was not aimed at him, the child leaned back on his seat as if it wasn't a flat crate turned upside down but something with upholstery. "Mamma did tell me something about that, and the other project had a… well, another project tied to it for that reason. Symbiotic life cycles."

"…indeed? Fascinating." A finished project was admittedly less interesting than one in progress, but still enough to be something he would like to see the final result of if only to know how the
undesired traits had been avoided in at least one example. "Continuing. I have been tasked with utilizing your projects into an end result that can be commercially traded, however the two main subjects to be incorporated is either an insect type or herbivorous. Bombyx mori, otherwise commonly known as silk worms, or ovis aries, the common sheep."

Petting a yellow and red striped spider leg as Pavuchky hung about on the wall docilly, Shamal glanced at him curiously. "Do you know herbivores do eat meat sometimes? They do mostly eat grass and plants, but insects get into their grazing fields and get eaten. Some even eat the dead, carrion, or their own predators. No one can really say why, just that occasionally they do."

"No... I was not aware." Rather simplified the complications, in truth.

"Insects are kind of forced to gain Flames from a user, there's not a whole lot of ways to get plant matter to retain Flames naturally without constant ah... application." The child simply shrugged, patting his creation one last time on the thorax before examining the game set up curiously with no little boredom. "Can I go back to what I was doing now?"

"I vowed to not report your past transgressions for the information. Further transgressions are not covered." Pointed out the Lightning rather blandly, ignoring the ugly look he received for it. "Indeed, I have no motivation to prevent your late-night escapades from reaching your mother if it would annoy her to learn I refrained."

Shamal gave him an utterly flat expression, touching one of the white pawns with a forefinger. "How about a trade then, Mister Verde? I've got a much better game than just chess, wanna play?"

The entire game board changed to a rough approximation of the castle grounds, sans the construction efforts, with the formerly white pieces turning into a full court of still mainly white colored figures. A king and queen, with faintly familiar features attributed to his godparents, and a vast array of the supporting ranks from Galina taking a bishop’s place to Peter being a rook.

Verde's own side changed suit, less detailed in black but that was excusable due to the ranks of fully defined caricature of their own 'positions'. A king and queen of nobles, priest for bishops, actual horse mounted knights in glass armor suits, massive shield bearers for rooks, and an entire line of peasants clutching farming implements to replace the pawns.

"...fascinating."

"Well?" Coaxed the young Mist mischievously, a proud smirk twisting his features. "One game, and you don't tell mamma."

It was already coming up upon midnight before his pen exploded on him, it was likely the child would flag before long. The Lightning, conversely, was well accustomed to late nights and odd hours to sleep within due to his college excursions and his recent antics.

"Very well." Shamal was not in the category of Viper, however much the young boy tried. "A completed game, and I will refrain from speaking of another night of baseless vigil over your young canine companion."

Belatedly catching on, exhaustion was likely the contributing factor to why the unstated passed by him without being realized before he could counter with another hook or bait prepared to counter, the child outright sulked at him.

"I will forgo this night's game," reluctantly but he was aware Sonya knew full well what Shamal was doing and he didn't particularly wish to be caught in that situation without getting something
appreciable in return, "although only on the caveat that tomorrow night we start with this."

If Shamal could change the units and the game board, then it was entirely likely the child could add to it. Verde had not had a challenging opponent in years, he did not expect one in the young Mist to be truthful. However, the change of limiting factors would then make for a vastly more interesting experience than simply challenging the child to a more 'normal' game of chess.
Chapter 14

(Saturday the 6th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Carefully placing down the freshly cleaned glass tank between the two windows, Sonya equally as carefully let go to ensure it'd stay in place without more support. The table that was actually bought recently and not made out of a convenient crate held steady, so it would do.

"Mamma?" Shamal spoke up from his bed, holding a rather paler than normal Luigi in his tiny hands. "...she doesn't look very good."

Marco and Alex were scuffling around the floor about her ankles, which made picking her way through things to set up the habitat for the creature a touch hard. She was actually really pleased the kid asked her for help him a muscle things around a little bit, because for one it showed even with a new pet he wanted more he wouldn't just discard the other out of hand… and allowed for this conversation.

His original chameleon practically gave birth to a whole separate race, given what Reborn's animal companion could do. The fact she, or he it still wasn't really all that clear, had recently given birth probably just didn't help it much. "I'm not really surprised."

"What's wrong with her?"

A shit ton if Luigi was actually male, probably. "She had a baby, Shamal. It's really taxing on any creature, not just humans or just chameleons. That you made her do it probably just made things worse."

The Mist stared at her blankly for a moment. Eventually he looked down at Luigi just generally leeching the heat from his hands and biding its time to conserve energy instead of clamber over the boy as it would've done last summer. "Did I hurt her?"

"That's not easy to clarify. There's a time and a place for nature to reproduce certain critters, if Luigi was in it or not is something you could probably figure out. Even still, it's not really a major factor depending on if she was at the point of being fully able to have little chameleons. More likely, she's just a little stressed from an out-of-season pregnancy and tired from doing what you wanted her to and make a baby. It's entirely possible she'll recover, kotenok… but then again, it's entirely possible she might not."

Luigi was a Dwarf Cape chameleon, which didn't tend to live more than a couple years outside captivity, so while she was an adult it was possible she was a little beyond or just getting into middle age for her type of critter.

"No! I didn't mean to hurt her!" Shamal snuggled his first pet up under his chin, and from the lack of any protesting wiggle from the lizard the heat was probably fully appreciated indeed. "I'll figure a way out to say sorry, I promise..."

Sonya studied the whole production, surprisingly Mist Flame free for the moment, as both the dogs stopped their play fighting to perk up in confusion. A black, brown, and white puppy valiantly charged the bed, utterly failed to get the height to jump up on top of it with the boy, and Marco bounced back onto his furry ass with a surprised yelp. Alek went for a more cautious approach, which was becoming typical for anything involving her canine and her brat, putting almost-white
paws on the sides of the so insurmountable furniture and trying to peer at what was so emotional by stretching out as much as he could.

He barely reached a knee due to being a midget of a fluff ball still, so he probably was still utterly confused to what was going on.

"Then keep her content and happy." Offered the thief, hitching a shoulder when the brat shot her a wounded look. "Really. What else would she want? Like Pavuchky, the Flames you used on her might've given her the intelligence to understand basic things… but what else would a chameleon want aside a hot rock to bask on and all the bugs she can eat? She might not know you're sorry, but if she magically gained the ability to not only talk but understand everything then hopefully she'll forgive you for a good life the best she could've asked for. You didn't do it thoughtlessly, just because you could. You did it so her baby could keep your godfather company, which was a sweet thought really."

The Mist peeled the lizard back a bit, giving her yet another inspection and how listless the creature was when the colder castle air hit her scales. "…okay."

Shamal didn't sound utterly convinced but then again, the issue wasn't one with a neat solution.

Kid had to decide for himself how much was too much when it came to something that couldn't protest or speak up for their own good. Like the dogs still utterly curious about what he was so mopey about, or the lizard in his hands. Or a future target, whatever career he picked for himself.

That he regretted possibly harming his pet was a good measure of his morals as they were now. However, that was for his own pet and not another feeling and free-thinking human being.

"Come on, kid. Plop her in here and let her nap or eat to her little heart's content. The best thing for her right now is some relaxation and peace."

Sliding off his bed, Shamal stepped into air to get the height to carefully lower Luigi into her glass cage. The lizard was utterly reluctant to do so, until it realized the cage had a sun lamp and part of the freshly cut log provided for her to climb on was already nice and toasty hot. "Why didn't you stop me?"

"Should I have? Luigi is your responsibility, kotenok. That also means what happens to her is your decision. It's implied as your right, as you care for her and supply what she needs to live that means she gives you companionship and you kind of restrict if she has any babies or company in her cage. She might recover just perfectly fine, and if so then nothing you did to her will have harmed her. She might not, then we'd know if making her have a baby did hurt her."

Aside which, had she brought it up he might've been pouring even more Flames into his chameleon when he got sick. She did regret she didn't spare a word for the creature's comfort beforehand, but frankly in the face of the risks and possible pitfalls she was also rather glad she hadn't.

Renato, or Reborn as he'd probably be when he showed back up like an unwanted penny, had his shape-shifting chameleon now. A half-Mist Flame pet would explain rather a lot about how a little green lizard could do half the shit she... vaguely?

…didn't really recall much about. Shapeshifting, obviously. Something about a gun, and… a… hang glider?

…what?

How the hell could any creature survive the percussion and force of a bullet basically being fired
Well, whatever. It happened, Shamal was fine, and Renato was… gone. She'd figure it out in a couple years. Maybe.

That chameleon's mother immediately sprawled out on the fresh hot bark, the peach-orange and blue markings that should've stood out luridly against the green scales ended up even more washed out under the sun lamp. She, he, and or it ignored the crickets hopping about the bark litter lining the bottom of the glass cage and even the water bowl the lizard could probably use as a swimming pool, so basking in heat was probably the creature's main concern right now.

Shamal slid down to the floor, ignoring Marco immediately attacking his shoes in hopes of getting reassuring attention himself. Given the sulky expression plastered across the brat's face, this plus his later nights spending time with his puppy even if the dratted thing was unconscious made for a very grumpy Mist.

Probably with an impending tantrum on the way.

Well… if there was going to be one anyways…

…but church and mass need to be attended tomorrow. For 'good' Catholic upbringing.

Sonya shoved a hand through her lengthening hair and sighed. "Come on, brat. The dogs need to probably find a patch of grass and there's nothing else we can do for Luigi but let her recover in peace. So, let's go see what treats Cesare's got to train the puppies up a little bit then spend some time on them."

She had half an idea, but it depended on having enough time and the right things.

Maybe Sunday night then, Verde did at least deserve a chance for his game in return for showing an ounce of human empathy for her brat's late-night antics not being very good for him.

Mist brat trudged his way out of his own room, looking half-contemplative and a little depressed. Marco, trying his damnedest to get the boy to trip and bring his face into licking-range, got continually stumped when the child simply didn't make contact with him if he got in the way.

Alek dropped down to all four paws now that everything over his head was seemingly done with, contemplating the boy and his brother himself before plopping down on his fluffy white ass and looking curiously up at her.

"…you trip down the stairs again, I'm going to laugh." Sonya informed him flatly, earning herself a few cautious wags of an equally fluffy tail. "No, I don't care how adorable you think you are. I'm still going to laugh."

Her puppy could apparently knock himself off his own oversized paws if his butt wagged hard enough, not just dust hard to reach corners of a room or under furniture with his tail.

Utterly unsurprised, she stepped over him while Alek tried to get back to his paws to join the brat on his trip probably to the kitchens.

(Sunday the 7th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
Being a perfectly dutiful Catholic, Cesare didn't eat much or at all before attending Mass. Depending on the situation, that was. However, leaving everything up to the lovely Ruslana was frightfully unfair to her if he was abstaining only eating for now due to religious reasons.

Some preparation could be done with a minimum of effort involved, simply arranging things to be easily fetched when ordered saved minutes of time when stacked together. Regardless of how bashfully the motherly woman had confessed to not be much of a cook, she could still then handle the entire task of feeding the early-rising castle residents herself until he returned to help.

Turning from setting out the usual spreads on the tables, intending to fetch the fruit arrangement and set that out for Tatiana tended to go for them first and that would buy the greenette a touch more time, the assassin had to immediately halt or risk bowling over young Shamal.

Cesare studied the child that had successfully snuck up on him, seemingly unintentionally. Then he glanced down at the ball of roly-poly puppy looking abashed and attempting to press up against the young Mist's legs, only to repeatedly fall through them as if they did not exist. "What ho? …Shamal? Is something wrong?"

Big brown eyes blinked innocently back at him, but he suspected the little boy had a motive for doing something as questionable as sneaking up on a Mafioso. "No."

…sure, and his real name was Paprika. The child seemed rather preoccupied since yesterday, and if it lingered on even today then there had to be something significant going on. "Ah. So, may I ask what is not so wrong?"

To be blunt, Cesare hadn't sought out Renato's godson for a bit of one-on-one for a couple reasons. For one, the boy was spending his summer vacation settling into his place at his godmother's castle. For another, he had plenty of distractions at hand to involve himself with from the dog at his feet to learning the personalities of who he was now living with.

Lastly, he wasn't entirely sure what to do with the boy himself. Cesare wasn't the fatherly sort, nor much of an uncle-figure, and generally parents did not like assassins hanging about their children so he wasn't much familiar with what one did with such a young child he wasn't growing up with or had a childhood much like his own.

He also didn't get a position with an invitation to so invite himself into the child's life.

There was an understated one from Renato, being brought here in the first place and shown the boy existed. That wasn't the only parental figure he had to concern himself with, the Lovely Bossy Dragoness was another matter entirely he was not yet comfortable assuming anything about.

As he would likely linger a couple years here, or more it depended on how everyone settled and treated one another as the years stretched on, it wasn't an immediate concern as it was. He could learn the differences between thieves and hitmen or assassins and in due time risk what he was certain of when the child was comfortable with his life.

"…I think… I might've hurt someone I didn't want to… but I didn't mean to."

Cesare had to strain his ears to make out the half-mumbled answer to his question as the young boy’s mind wandered in the silence, and apparently asking had depressed the child to a point his godmother would probably dislike heavily. "Hmm… would you like some advice?"

The utterly skeptical eyeballing was entirely uncalled for.

"Yes, yes. Weird new person, you're not sure if you can trust, so on." With a flick of a wrist, the
assassin made a grand gesture to the kitchens. "Come along, little rascal. Let us feed that gluttonous puppy of yours."

"You don't really look like a person who shells out free advice." Shamal informed him snottily but was trotting along with puppy at his side anyways. "If I had to guess, you're probably more the type to point and laugh."

"All too true." It was utterly so, and Cesare wasn't the type to pretend otherwise for any reason. "That doesn't mean I have somehow avoided being in your position before."

The 'Mist' brat made a stepladder where none existed before, to clearly see what portion the chef placed in the two dog bowls for Marco and his slightly tardy littermate Alek. "So why offer?"

"Long history with your godfather." Basically, it was the only reason he had to come here. Not the only one he had to be here, because his godmother really did pay very well for any task he might end up expending a little energy upon for her benefit. "Don't ask."

The child looked just a slight bit put out at that immediate disclaimer, jutting lower lip and all he was not going to fall for.

"More to the point I'm certainly old enough, especially for someone in my career, that I've ended up harming those I had no intention of inconveniencing."

Alek, somehow knowing breakfast was being served, ended up crashing into his very intent on the food brother in his haste not to be late. Which took both puppies to the tiled floor, especially as the pale furred pup didn't quite have mastery over his oversized paws just yet and the floor gave neither much traction to grip to. It only gave him more time to see how the young boy took his words, so he didn't mind the doggy distraction.

Shamal wasn't immediately sold on his possible expertise in his current troubles, which was rather smart of him. All sorts had different reactions or thought different things were important when it came to such difficulties, meaning even if Cesare's experiences with alarming or shocking civilians unintentionally matched whatever issue he currently had the end the results would still probably differ since he wasn't a tetchy young child and said child wasn't an assassin.

Such made offering specific advice a kind of chancy proposition, especially as he didn't know the exact details of whatever situation Shamal had. Good thing he had no intent to offer specifics.

"You know what it was you did wrong, I hope?"

"Not... really." The child shot back, suitably vague enough even if he was now confused about whatever his little issue was.

"Well, should that not be your first goal?" Posed Cesare, setting down the doggy food bowls now they wouldn't immediately tip them over trying to sort themselves out. Alek and Marco both dove for the food as if the pups had never been fed, the greedy guts. "You can stew over what ifs and possibilities until you're old and grey... and it will never help you. Or you could put a little energy into it, which if you care enough to feel bad for harming someone is really the least you could do to make up for it."

Shamal, staying out of the puppy frenzy to guzzle the most food first and then try to steal a few bites of the other's, pondered that over. "But what if you can't make up for it? Or even say sorry?"

"Then use it as the learning experience it is. You might never regain a friend, or repeat a self-indulgent act that harmed whomever, so on... but to ignore it and suffer a repeat of this situation in
either a deadlier way or without the required caution later? You should at least learn where some
more care should be applied if nothing else can be done." That was not an answer the brat was
looking for, pity. "Shamal, with those like you and those in careers like mine… it is entirely too easy
to harm someone we did not intend. You will make mistakes, it's simply nature as you learn and
grow better. Realizing and repenting for those mistakes, when we can't exactly confess to them to
another or seek absolution in other ways, needs to be done on your own. Most of the time, without
regaining anything you might've lost."

The child huffed, mainly at him if he could guess, and slid down to the ground as his little step ladder
disappeared without much fanfare. Marco immediately abandoned the sniffing for more tasty morsels
to his brother and pounced on the boy gleefully, Alek glanced up while licking his chops then went
back to searching out anything the chef might've dropped to the floor.

Only to pause at the water bowl set out for the pups and tipping the whole thing over his fur instead
of getting a drink.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 7th of June, 1970 continued. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian
Republic.)

Sonya made a point to inform Verde that Shamal taught Usov his game, and that it probably was
familiar to the Mirror Lady too, before grabbing the things she needed for her plan. Not that it would
keep the Lightning off her ass about this, but it should buy her a few days.

Her brat had been tasked with packing up enough clothing for a week and had been reassured that
they would not be far from the castle but getting extras or replacements when needed might be tricky.
He spent a few hours doing so with only three breaks to lavish Marco with the attention the puppy
was probably getting spoiled on. Probably half of his clothing needed to be replaced anyways, so it
wouldn't really matter if he packed 'good' or 'bad' clothing, they'd go shopping when they got back
anyways.

Tatiana agreed to the plan, or at least her end of it as explained to her, so that left just arranging
everything else with the 'staff' she had.

Cesare was utterly alright with cooking a bit of a separate meal for them, and while Galina was doing
the hard interviews to an acceptable standard Ruslana was perfectly alright with a week to get new
hires more or less in order on her own as a kind of test run.

The Mirror Lady would have to bring her back for Fiorella's ballet instruction, but the young woman
promised that would not be remotely hard and they could send Usov and Larion to keep Shamal
entertained during that time as well.

Maximillian, Hawk, and Afanasii all had enough to do themselves helping Master Yaozu find a
suitable building to either teach out of right away or that would need only minimal retrofitting.
Mingxia was delighted to be given the task of sorting out and maintaining a 'school supply', of
notebooks and writing utensils the children of the castle might need for the next year or more. Adrik
had more than enough to do himself, but she did talk to him about anything he might think of to pass
on.

Then Peter needed an admonishment not to let Verde bully him into working longer hours than was
good for him, before the Lightning could drag the Sun out to the garage and continue the Flame-
glass experiments now he had Galina's makeup minerals to fully explore what was or was not a
Lightning-usable crystal formation. Waiting out the thin man's protest that he wasn't being bullied
and it was entirely interesting so not an imposition took another half hour, and that was even before
counting Verde's irritable interjections.

It took her five freaking hours to catch up with everyone, and frankly they weren't exactly trying to
hide from her. Alek gamely tried to keep up with her running around, as a not so dark shadow, but
by hour four he was entirely tuckered out and whimpered pitifully until she carried him around
instead.

So a little later than she planned on, she finally informed Shamal of her idea as they packed
everything else they needed to take with. Like puppy kibble. "We're going camping. Not far, just out
on the back acers."

Her brat wrinkled his nose at her, gamely putting a few canteens of water to her pack and keeping
one for him and Marco. "Why?"

"You've not been sleeping recently. At this way, I can ensure you tire yourself out to actually sleep
through the night." Ignoring the guilty start which dropped a bag of doggy kibble his puppy
immediately pounced upon, she rescued the dog's dinner from being eaten so soon after lunch and
tipped it into the brat's pack. "Aside just something to do for a few days, I can teach you a couple
survival skills in between breaks to continue our Greek lessons. Like how to start a fire if caught in
front of a civilian, or to build a rough temporary shelter without Flames if you get stuck without
somewhere."

She traveled with a Russian Circus, a professional one. They had things taught to all members like
how to figure out if you had to hunker down and wait for rescue once the circus reached the next
municipal area or how to re-find tracks or trails if you got really separated from any sign of
civilization, how to find fresh water from anywhere like a desert climate to how to boil off seawater
for clean, how to build a temporary shelter using all types of materials, and other survival tricks for
inclement weather and nasty situations.

However, as it turned out, moss grew on all sides of a trunk or rock. Whoever the fuck told her that
trick deserved a punch to the gut, the moment she learned where she picked it up from.

Zinaida, asked for help for the entire navigational issues Sonya might have and being the most
familiar with the area in question who knew where all the freshly seeded beehives were on the
mountainside, smiled broadly as she waited for them to get set. "Personally, I think it's a wonderful
idea. I might steal it to do with Usov and Max a bit closer to fall."

"Aren't you teaching Lady Vongola ballet?" Shamal inquired next while Marco decided they were
playing tug 'o war with him and a sock, which interestingly enough wasn't a protest but just a
complication he was aware of.

"The Mirror Lady will bring us back for a few hours for that, where you can get whatever you might
need to do for the next day." She informed him, turning around only to accept the lengths of braided
line from the other woman so they could tether the dogs up for the night and not need to worry they'd
go off chasing whatever rabbit and never be seen again. "Alek, for fuck's sake, go distract your
brother."

Her puppy glanced up with his head tilted to see her mainly through his brown eye, a touch guilty
because he was more than halfway into her pack apparently from the very moment she turned away
and he knew full well he shouldn't be there after being removed twice before. After a moment of
staring at each other, the puppy decided going back to sniffing through her clothing was exactly what
she asked.
Then he curled up for a nap, right on top of her underthings.

(Tuesday the 9th of June, 1970. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Their first night out was simple enough.

Sonya figured out Crina had been way too drunk for the proper order of things when she gave the obligatory lecture on how to mock together an emergency shelter for tropical or near-tropical climates in a fast hurry, but eventually found out how to make a kind of grass hut using saplings and a stupid number of palm fronds. It was a bit lopsided due to poor measurement care but would maybe keep a light drizzle off them while they built a better and sturdier shelter later.

Shamal, and the puppies if she had to be honest, were way too excited to sleep right the first night. She had put the trip off for Sunday church shit and more importantly for Afanasii to pick them up some sleeping bags, so while somewhat annoyed she didn't greatly mind a longer than usual lesson on how to read common day Greek with them. It was at least balmy and somewhat comfortable, however hard it was to read by firelight a dose of steady purple Flames fixed that well enough.

Day two, the lack of proper sleep hit her brat like a ton of bricks. In spite of his best efforts otherwise, the kid took two naps with the dogs. Once in the morning, where she chopped a shit load of deadfall wood to turn into firewood for later, and again in the evening which wasn't quite as ideal.

There was an embarrassingly tiny mountain creek near where Zinaida took them out to, which did have at least a rather sub-par clay deposit. As pottery was actually her favored 'survival' task with the circus, she taught her brat how to make his own pots and cups by hand if he needed them just before lunch their first real day ‘roughing it’. Half of them would break when fired in the campfire, there was too much sand and silt in that deposit for anything else, but it wasn't like they needed the pots for anything.

She had thought that as watching a fire and feeding it twigs or a branch or two when it got low to 'cook' the clay pots into pottery wasn't energy intensive, Shamal would stay awake enough especially with Marco to play with while he tended the fire. A night of drying should've solidified the clay well enough to give it a good chance to survive a turn in fire, so it wasn't particularly a problem he wasn't up for anything more energetic.

She was wrong in that, coming back from finding young trees to turn into posts for their next shelter project she found both boy and puppy happily snoozing away and the stone-lined campfire almost out. Alek, who had either gotten tired of not being involved with Marco's fun when it came to the boy that did seem to unnerve him a little or just from slowly growing familiarity, wasn't too far away himself.

Of course, her formally white-and-brown-and-grey-at-best dappled puppy was now a solid tan-brown all over. Gleefully rolling around in a loose pile of earth from digging out the campfire to give himself a good dust bath and having the brass balls to look at her innocently with friendly wags of his tail topped off with a doggy grin for looming over him.

Shamal woke up to her exasperatedly brushing out Alek's coat, stopping every now and again to knock the greater amount of dirt off the brush and comb she was trying to clean him with. "Try not to fall asleep again, brat. We've got a couple things to cover."

The brat slurred out something, or grumbled it wasn't distinct enough to be sure, before moving. He
fitfully tossed a few bits of wood on the low embers of their campfire, before dragging himself up and sliding over to her in a rather zombie-like fashion.

"Sorry, but it's a new pot in the fire." He informed her, sliding under her arm to get him included into a kind of half-bastardized hug. "The other one cracked, like you said it might."

Adjusting so she didn't squeeze him but wouldn't let Alek escape the grooming session before he was at least majority off-white again, even if that off-white was more tan than grey, the thief systematically continued her task of combing the dirt out of her puppy's fur. "You turned it upside down on the embers before building the fire back up, right?"

"Yeah."

That one was probably going to crack too, fluctuating between or to a high temperature tended to do that to most things even if the sand caught in the clay wasn't going to do it itself. "Fine then. I don't mind if you stay up one night or so a month, kid. I've got an issue for an entire week of staying up late."

"...I'm a little scared I'll wake up back in the Iron Fort." Shamal informed her ribs moodily, curling up only to pause just long enough for Marco to fall into his lap and be hugged too. "Like if I got to sleep I won't be here anymore, and it'll be another month or year before you can take me in."

Yeah, she got that one herself occasionally now she had him. Breakfast was fast becoming her favorite part of the day, and not just because she could do a full headcount then. "I'm not mad, brat. I understand there's going to be transitional problems, there's been nothing but the last couple weeks to be honest. Sitting up with Marco, when he's sleeping anyways, isn't really trying to sleep in spite of the issues."

There was a sulky Mist huff from her side.

"I do appreciate you didn't immediately pick a fight with Larion when you got here." She teased lightly, trying to figure out how much was impossible when it came to Alek's oversized paws. The fur there on his forelegs wasn't as long as the rest of it, and frankly the puppy had decided that in return for the grooming he was going to mouth her fingers and wrist playfully to turn the dusty dirt into mud.

Even if she was trying to tease out a knot in his fur and not play with him.

"Larion sucked as an assassin, it's not worth it to be even upset with him." Snottily sniffed her brat, hugging a happy as punch tri colored puppy to his chest.

"Well good then."

"What's the wood for? The long poles you brought back?" Shamal immediately continued with, probably so she wouldn't remark about his lack of promise about going to sleep or at least to bed at a decent time from now on.

"Tomorrow we're going to build something that will probably outlast a summer rainstorm. I don't really trust the hut all that much, it's the first one I ever built." Releasing Alek, without letting him the slack in the line leashing the dogs to the camp to immediately go back to rolling around the loose dirt mound, she dismal state of the pet fur brush and her comb. "You're actually going to help, so getting a decent amount of sleep tonight is kind of necessary brat."

The dog went immediately to the water bowl put out for them, so she figured he was perfectly fine and didn't know what prompted the sudden grooming session… or just wanted the taste of mud out
of his mouth.

Tonight, probably after the Mirror Lady swapped them out for Fiorella's dance instruction, she had to have the whole 'last time was probably the last time we'll see Renato for a long while' conversation… which she was nearly positive the grass hut wouldn't survive having it within. Maybe Cesare could be talked into giving her something sweet and heavy to lull the Mist brat to sleep afterwards, once he got most of his bad mood out from the tiredness and the news piled on top of one another.

At least out here, halfway to nowhere, Shamal could do whatever he felt like up to and including throwing a tantrum and not be quietly judged for it. Sonya wasn't blind to the expectation 'her' people were heaping on the brat, because it was entirely for his sake they were all out here and it was human nature to equate effort with some kind of quality. If the kid picked up on it or not was a question, and what he'd do in return by either holding up whatever or utterly trashing it for another daring to hold him to imaginary standards, but until her godson could make a coherent choice either way she'd protect his interests the best she could.

It was the same she had to deal with. Others seemed to think she was 'competent' when in fact she was socially incompetent and not entirely sure what the hell she was doing out here. Others had their own reasons to tag along, obviously… but that still didn't mean she knew what she was doing with them.

"What else are we going to need for a 'sturdier' shelter?" Shamal inquired some few minutes later, still curled up to her side with his puppy even if it was late noon and a little hot still.

"Mud."

"…you brought us out here just so you could play in the dirt, didn't you?" Accused her brat with dry and almost lazy sounding amusement, a tone she could put money on being copied from a certain hitman.

"Pretty much, yes. I like arts and crafts." No self-respecting thief would go for a clumsily made clay mug when there were stupidly expensive Chinese vases or a French porcelain soup bowls for the stealing, and frankly making her own plates or knitting a few blankets was kind of more than she expected to do with her own two hands. "That doesn't mean it's useless to know how to do."

"Sure, mamma. I totally believe you."

…patronizing little snot. He wasn't so smugly self-satisfied when she gripped him by the ankle and dangled him in front of her, his bark of laughter got Marco to scramble upright from where he spilled out to and Alek to come racing back from chasing some insect around the clearing.

His squeal when she dipped him just low enough to get a face full of puppy tongue was pretty satisfying for her, even if her puppy didn't get that close and just danced around the boy and his littermate.

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(Thursday the 11th of June, 1970. Old Town, Metropolitan City of Bari, Apulia Region, Italian Republic.)

"Rum?"

"What, are you a living stereotype?" Sneered the other man, deciding keeping watch was a little
more important than his fellow. "We're not pirates, dumbass."

"Doesn't mean I can't like rum." Dismissed the first and probably overly generous middle-aged Mafioso without much care, likely as that meant he could hog the liquor to himself rather than share. "Just means you've got a limited imagination."

Whatever the younger scut would've snapped back would remain forever unknown, because Renato got tired of lingering around and shot him in the back of the head. Before the other one could do more than startle and drop his bottle, he got the hitman's forearm to the windpipe to both knock him back against the brick wall of a nearby house and keep things below a bellow.

"Hello, Cherry." Greeted the Sun Flame user pleasantly, as sirens in the distance started the countdown for how long he had to linger.

Impressively, even with limited air and his face turning a rather alarming red, the older man could still make a face at the nickname. "It's… Chris-topher, you… fucking…"

"Yes, yes. Bastard, asshole, murderous individual after my damn blood. Or all of the above." Dismissed Renato pointedly, leaning further in so more of his not insignificant weight on the other man's windpipe. "Don't care what your issue with me is, Cherry. I've got a little problem with the people you've picked to work with."

Interestingly, in spite of his breathing worries, a twisted and rather hateful expression passed over the other Mafioso's features. It was partially happy, even as the Sun levered a pistol to take off his lower jaw if the man tried anything too adventurous.

"Good news then, I take it? Or at least… news you think is good."

"What. Surprised… someone's finally… done with putting u-up with… your… shit?" A hateful smirk spread just a touch more. "A lot… of… someones."

"I could kill you," he admittedly really should, given this wasn't the first time the man had tried to stab him in the back, "but… well, I believe being the only survivor yet again might just ruin your life better than I could ever do purposefully. Ciao, Cherry."

A lack of air meant the middle-aged man couldn't quite react in time to dodge the pistol whip that knocked him out cold. With how many times the hitman had done that to the man it really wasn't a surprise he was still a middling effective Mafioso, good for putting a warm body in a spot but not really good for much else.

Stepping over the bodies, he started walking on through the darkened streets to his next target before the police could narrow down where the gunshot occurred to a specific street corner near such a 'hot' quarter notorious for such.

It wasn't the best idea to leave a survivor, to be completely honest. Renato was just really sick of the limitedly ineffectual attempts to get him killed from the older man and being petty was almost a requirement to be a good Mafioso.

Besides which, someone had to place him at or near the 'scene' to be presumed dead or otherwise. Might as well be Christopher, rather than some nameless idiot who couldn't fill that purpose for him due to never seeing him before.

It would also ensure the police were a step behind him, catching or cleaning up after his little 'escapade' tonight to be sure everyone would be accounted for once he was done. A dead body next to him would be all sorts of suggestive, and that wasn't counting what other crimes the older Mafioso
had to his name that needed sorting.

Lando, had he kept his leg, probably would've done worse to Christopher than Renato had done so far. Then again, for starting the mess in the first place, it wasn't likely Cherry could've survived the other hitman for long.

He had gotten off lightly to deal with the Sun and not the other, not that it seemed the middle-aged Mafioso was remotely aware or appreciative of that little detail. He probably wouldn't learn from this either, which really was such a pity for him when Renato came back as someone else.

The older Old Town part of Bari, the north part of an eastern coastal harbor city, was a literal maze purposefully built to be one. Rampant with petty and moderate crime, it wasn't really a place any but those that truly belonged to the mafia went. Too many escape routes and bolt holes existed for the residents to stump and foil any attempts to enforce law and order, and it was probably the fact he had a still smoking pistol in hand that prevented anyone from challenging the hitman's mere presence among them.

A problem with places like Bari Vecchia was that it allowed certain types to grip power without remotely being intelligent or responsible with it, just simply by being the biggest bully in the pool of particularly nasty types. It came with the assumption that just because all their previous detractors either fell in line or died off easily it meant those from 'softer' places would do so as well.

There was this one particular guppy that thought himself a shark, who Renato either crossed or irritated somehow in the past few years. He wasn't exactly sure, which might be the point. Someone who thought or believed themselves better, getting ignored or dismissed out of hand by a 'womanizing' hitman?

That one, and a few lesser irritants who never would've gotten the guts to try anything without him providing a convenient scapegoat to hide behind or offer up if shit went south, were having a little meeting tonight. Mostly to do with little old him, and the fact things were getting a bit long to have to continually fund a hit squad attempting to take him down.

Well, it had only been a full year since he started catching on.

Now he was specifically looking, Renato could trace all this bullshit back through to a particular incident that happened one spring night on Mafia Land. When he was trying to convince Sonya she needed to put forth a little more effort to keep on time or in contact when it came to their godson, and she yanked him out of the path of a bullet even if she thought he was trying to 'intimidate' her.

It stood out in his memory even now because he had been well past the point of needing to 'prove' himself on the island by that time. He had lived there for a few years shy of a decade by that point, most of anyone who would've had something to say about an Italian Mafioso living among them had long since tried their hand at something and got put down for it.

To the credit of the luckless moron he shot the knee out of, he kept his trap shut more than well enough to have the hitman fooled it was just a chance opportunity and not a planned out attempt on his life. So soon after having his contact networked gutted and in need of rebuilding, Renato hadn't really questioned why a trio of killers had come after him while he was attempting to have a conversation with a lady about her missing a particular brat's birthday.

Admittedly, he had been a tiny bit distracted and pressed for time while doing the interrogation. A mistake he would never do again, given what that long dead pawn managed to slide under his notice.

Renato took a sharp turn into a particularly nasty alleyway, which had this little lip of brick sticking
out halfway from some long-abandoned construction effort. It would provide him equally little cover for the first volley his tail would likely get off attempting to shoot him in the back, and with a moment of space he peeled back his suit jacket to be sure Leon was safely snoozing away in the breast pocket.

Even if he only scouted this area out the last few days and these morons likely lived around here, one of the shots that were fired blindly in hopes of wounding him still slammed into brickwork instead of flesh. Leaning out of the small niche, the hitman fired twice in response and felled both men without much difficulty.

Looking upwards, at the not particularly cleaner building he was now under, he examined the situation and what he had to work with to get inside to crash a very hushed up meeting of particularly dim nasty types. Obviously gunshots weren’t exactly rare out here, so the occupants wouldn’t be jumpy and panicked to hear them so close… but it would still put people on edge to not know what was going on.

Good.

Renato glanced to the side down the empty alleyway, then to the entrance of this pissed soaked crevasse in the city and lit a few fingers with his Flames before letting the manifestation of his Will drop to the ground. Sun Flames were not particularly good to light fires with, everything else but combustion tended to happen first… but a Flame user was still a Flame user.

It was all still fire, and there was a lot of fuel to burn through in this little dirty underside of an Italian port.

As bright yellow slowly changed to orange and hot red embers in the trash heaped below, Renato dug long fingers into weathered cracks in the mortar for the purchase to laboriously pull himself up the wall without allowing himself to be spotted by just anyone looking out the window. He would skip the first two floors and enter the third, even if that meant he had to go down four.

With the 'back' entrance and underground escape hatch blocked by fire, there was only two exits from this building now. The roof, and jumping to another nearby neighbors', or the very front which was about to have a small issue with the police likely hot on his tail.

He had a witness, it wasn't like there was a reason to leave many more survivors from tonight.

(Friday the 12th of June, 1970. Principal's Office, Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Looking up from the paperwork she had to do before the school reopened for the fall, Lisa arched an eyebrow at the three young men that showed themselves into her office. "Boys. Good afternoon?"

"Afternoon Lisa." Dmitriy greeted her pleasantly, folding his tattooed hands behind his back. "Could I happen to get Sonya's address?"

"I," insisted the current head of the Flame user offices, just a touch pointedly, "just want to check
with her on a few of the details she and Galina probably couldn't record for me. I can't speak for the others-

"I," Nicolai interrupted equally as pointedly, shooting the swarthy skinned vor an annoyed glare, "need to speak with the whole gang myself and apparently the rest of the group is with her."

Ziven simply shrugged, not seeing much of a point in interjecting anything himself.

"How is young Dorokhov, Ziven?"

"Grumpy as all hell, but even he couldn't argue against a period of time to see how well his influence stands up with my absence." With another simple shrug, the young blond gave her a cheeky smirk. "We're not expecting anything too interesting, but he's really keen on expanding a little north."

As long as it was north, then no one in the Zolotov clan would care much. Glancing to young Nicolai just let her catch the slightly wry flash of sourness across the bigger young man's face.

Well, time had that effect on plans. Ziven being a Mafia Home Tutor kind of locked him into place, dealing with forces that not even her youngest daughter would dare to cross just yet and stepping between invisible lines with what he could or could not do for his student. Young Adrik was injured, and likely not to return to active larceny even if Tatiana could somehow magic up a whole new lung for the poor boy. Galina and the eldest of her brood might not have ever returned depending on their own situations Lisa could possibly not know of, and that did leave Nicolai a little at loose ends.

It was entirely possible the Home Tutor would eventually wander after her Arseniy somewhat, just slotting into training up the next generation without specifically choosing the life for himself. Adrik seemed to have his next few steps pre-planned for him, but Sonya was turning out to be a very good employer and the even younger man should have a better foothold for whatever he was for next from that.

Now… what to do with Tatiana's old co-leader?

…before that, she could and did agree he needed closure of a kind.

"Are you sure you have the time, Dmitriy?"

"There's a significant chunk of work I no longer have to do," admitted the slightly more tattooed vor only a touch sheepishly, "I might as well use the time your outfit saves me to catch up with the remaining details."

"Nicolai, Ziven?"

"I arranged the break, and like I said Timur's getting to the point where he can stand without me even if the Flame shit earns him more attention than fair." The younger man in her room gave her a smirk and yet another shrug, "Nicolai's got nothing else to do, vor Arseniy sent him to help me."

"I suppose the lot of you are already aware the general region Nya got to, right?" She inquired, entirely unsurprised when she got a trio of short nods. "Dmitriy, given how badly she separated from the Zolotov Clan…?"

Oh, her daughter allowed the impressions it wasn't a completely hostile break stand… but no one in the clan was really fooled much. Outside of it was another thing, what that deception was more aimed to fool so the assumption was allowed to stand without correction, but as Arseniy was a respected vor his rebellious daughter was kind of a topic of a lot of gossip now and again.
"I'm aware. I've been fielding questions about it since about when I got back." Confirmed the young Rain tartly, ignoring the strange look that crossed the bigger vor's features. "I'll be sure not to tweak her last nerve the best I can."

Ziven coughed sharply, then pretended he hadn't and returned a blind jab to his ribs with interest and a sharp punch back.

"Hopefully your magical ability to speak with her even when she was annoyed as children will have lasted now you both are adults." Lisa offered as she dug through a desk drawer, extracting her rolodex from the bottom left hand drawer and a new square of her simply elegant business or 'calling' cards. Quickly noting down the exact address for Sonya's castle, she flicked it up between two fingers and held it out. "This all being said, boys… you will be representing Zolotov interests while in Italy. Try and leave the locals with a positive or at least competent impression, if you could."

While Dmitriy was glancing over the card, Nicolai gave her a searching look over his shoulder. "Do you have interests there?"

"I have interests in a few places." Lisa demurred politely, with a wicked smirk. "Anything else I can help you boys with? I'd like to get done here in time to make dinner tonight."

"Since you now have the bulk of my old headache, we'll get out of your hair." Returned the Rain simply, tucking the card away into his pocket even if the more muscular vor had seemed to want a good look too. "But… thanks, Lisa. For taking this on, I feel a hell of a lot less worried with you minding the brats through their easily impressed upon years."

"You didn't do that badly, Dmitriy."

"Evidence says otherwise."

"Fadei's situation was not of his own making, nothing you could've done at the time would have helped him, and all youngsters can behave stupidly when they believe the truth is otherwise." She informed him, which seemingly made no dent in the younger man's opinion. "But I suppose I will just say I do not mind, then."

She earned herself a bitterly wry smirk before the Rain turned to leave her office. Ziven wasn't too far behind, and even more interesting Nicolai hesitated before following after without speaking to her.

…hmm.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 12th of June, 1970 continued. Superbi Manse, San Martino, Metropolitan City of Genoa, Italian Republic.)

Fiorella looked up from her address book at the short announcement, her 'homework' from her Tutor as she claimed, blinking a few times in the direction of her bodyguard's husband as she refocused. "I… beg your pardon?"

"Preliminary reports." Silvano explained first, leafing through the encoded pages hand delivered to him for anything further to add in. Encoded 'general situational' reports of Italy's underworld movements from the Vongola Alliance, detailing the rise and fall of local criminal powers and the ever-shifting happenings from north to southern Italy's Mafia ranks. "It's… entirely possible that it is incorrect."
The entirely unimpressed and not remotely fooled expression the mother of three pinned on the sandy haired swordsman and Mafioso was probably either from raising three Sky-like sons or a credit to her recent lessons under a Russian Schoolmistress.

Nilda was a little impressed with that expression, to be honest. It was fair enough, things that got into those reports in the man's hands didn't tend to be baseless gossip.

She set down her own pre-dinner work, mainly approving the meal plans for tomorrow and other nitpicky orders for the running of a manor home her husband didn't enjoy combing through for any issues and she did. "Who made the report, Silvano?"

"The… Giglio Nero Famiglia, they're based outside Lecce and were the closest to the situation." Before she could absorb the highly unlikely possibility the famed information brokers had misreported the situation early or not, he continued on deliberately. "There's only one police report that attributes Mafioso Sinclair of being local at the time of the entirely convenient 'fire', and only through the claims of a… former… associate."

If it was a 'former' associate and a police report?

Entirely likely someone was trying to set the Sun using hitman up for a fall and the report was not entirely true or mistook the man's aims that night.

…however, there still remained the information brokers doing the reporting. That line of Skies was not the kind to mingle, but also weren't the type to spread bad information recklessly. Luce had not seemed much different from how the rest of her line tended to be from the start of their involvement with Vongola, from the one glance Nilda had of the woman that one Ball.

Not enough to make any assumptions about the Mafia Donna's character, and what was influenced what could be more than enough to make Nilda wary of assuming.

"How concrete is that information, Silvano?" Inquired the Lady Vongola, brushing off some of her old decorum training to speak to her bodyguard's husband as more a ranking member of his social circle and not just a guest in his home. "Do you believe it is enough to go on to pass to outsiders?"

"…no. Not as of yet." Decided the Superbi head firmly after a long moment to reread the information in his hands for the third time to be absolutely sure of what he was informing the women of. "The only affirmed piece of information locates a man claimed to be Mafioso Sinclair close by, and that is from civilian institutions of law enforcements. A warning is due to Miss Bazanova, perhaps. At best. Even then, there might not be a point to do so until more information becomes available. Young Shamal would probably be highly upset if it is a false report, however that could be left up to his godmother's digression."

Given the rate of reports the Vongola Alliance churned out from their network of spies and informants, the situation would be confirmed or denied in the next few days. Tomorrow at best, Monday at worse.

"What do you take as the best course forward, Lady Vongola?" Inquired the other Rain after a moment, actually lowering his papers to give the mother of three his full attention.

"…you're asking me?"

"I believe you are the closest associate to the Cloud on our southern flank in this room. Therefore you would have the best advice for how to improve, or at least not sour, the Superbi relations with her." Silvano pointed out for her, rather thoughtfully clear and concise reasons he or anyone in his
position would court the woman's favor due to her own connections and hoping to make use of such themselves.

Which were two very good points anyways.

Daniella Vongola tried the exact same thing Fiorella did, to coax Sonya into willingly lingering just a little in her presence, and somehow the younger woman managed to pull it off by unknowing accident while Ottavia utterly failed. Equally as true, being the closest neighbors to the Cloud in question could either be a good boon to the Superbi Famiglia or a massive irritation.

"Frankly, Silvano, Russians seemed to prefer their dealings done in person." Fiorella interrupted Nilda's thoughts with her opinion, which was probably the best informed in the whole of north Italia discounting the Russians themselves. "Arranging a meeting might be a little premature with only a confirmed rumor placing Renato Sinclair near a rather confusing situation to pass along, unless you believe the information will improve in short time."

Nilda's husband examined the sheets of paper in his hands yet again. "...while I do not feel right spreading rumor without waiting for confirmation when it would harm an already orphaned boy, this is... unusual enough I feel it may be warranted in this situation."

"Forgive me, but how is it unusual?" Asked Lady Vongola delicately, the closest she had ever come to actually asking anything mafia-related from the head of the Superbi Famiglia since she arrived. "If it is sensitive information of course you should not tell me... but I am curious how this is somehow newsworthy when it is merely rumor and police reports I did not take the Mafia to consider important. Indeed, from your own words, you do not seem too trusting of it."

"Frankly, given what little I know of Vongola tradition, submitting these reports to the wider Alliance should've been your responsibility."

"Ottavia left it to her Rain Berretta, I've assisted her a time or twice as she continued for Nono." Nilda reminded him a little pointedly, although without true heat because Fiorella had more than enough ammunition against her husband's lack of action when it came to her. An entirely late letter or not the Sky's recent actions, or inactions to be more accurate, to his wife were entirely strange for a normally diplomatic Mafia Don. "It is not always a responsibility of Lady Vongola, it just may be. Fiorella will not have to do anything she does not feel comfortable with."

Silvano blinked at her blankly for a second before he recalled the issue of the other woman's Tutor, and he inclined his head to her as if acknowledging a fencing point before turning back to their guest. "Of course, Nilda. My apology for pressing an assumption upon your station, Lady Vongola. As to your actual question, we do not normally have one... or multiple as it is not entirely clear yet who all have died, smaller Mafia groups disappearing to a man. All who were nearby at the time are passed on to allow us to check into the possibility of ruling out certain individuals attempting to be blamed. All information available, including what the civilians know, is passed along in such events."

"How could anyone tell?" Questioned the older mother of three slowly, a little paler than normal but surprisingly not queasy over the topic of figuring out the blame for such death. "That an entire group or two have gone missing?"

"The current issue is that no one can, aside by where they should be that night and missing them from where else they might have gone afterwards. It is a 'preliminary' report on all details available for that reason."

"And not because some can be bewilderingly wary of Sonya's reactions?" Pressed Fiorella just a touch tartly and more keenly almost immediately in spite of her pale color, likely getting ready to be
offended on behalf of a Russian who would be probably bemused at such stout defense of herself.

"That is not unique to just Sonya, Fiorella." Nilda chipped in for her husband when the man might've just outright confirmed such. "There's notices in the Vongola Alliance reports on all Italian, or now Italian resident, Cloud Flame users and any known complication that might impact any dealings with one. It's less to do with Sonya specifically and more to do with... well, the 'typical' ill humor of her type due to outside influences."

Although... her charge did have a point. Mafioso Sinclair wasn't really the type to act recklessly, though he was known to have 'dealt with' a smaller famiglia that inconvenienced him slightly after he became known to Nono Vongola. The fact he was so 'obviously' sighted nearby might very well be just part of the hitman's plans, therefore reporting anything to Sonya would be more than just premature. Especially if, from association, the woman gave them more credit than she would just any Italians only for it to be wrong in the end.

However thin that possibility was.

"Silvano, I think I sort of agree with Fiorella on second thought..." No one would remotely want to be the one to inform the Soviet Storm-Cloud her contact had met with a messy if somewhat spectacular end... and Nilda was rather firmly in that camp as well. "This isn't actually unusual behavior from Mafioso Sinclair when someone crosses him and proves to be enough of a pain. Perhaps we should wait for a confirmation before setting up that meeting."

Her husband, delightful and suitably ruthless while still being kind man that he was, inclined his head to accept that council from both women. "Then... I suppose we wait for tomorrow's reports."
Chapter 15

(Saturday the 13th of June, 1970. Mafia Land.)

**Björn** rather carefully smoothed all expression from his face, and gave the man attempting to bar his way further into the establishment than simply one shoe a patient look. "*I'd advise you to rethink that claim.*"

The grin he earned was more than a little rotted in a few places, which made for distinctly *unpleasant* time being face-to-face with the man. "*Really, high-nose? And what do you base that on?*"

…well, this was about to go nowhere fast.

The Lightning-Storm pulled the knife from his undervest and slammed it into the hand on the doorjamb, while his detractor twitched spastically at the Lightning Flames crackling along the metal now nailing him to a wall he stepped aside and past.

Barely half a *meter* into the establishment.

"*Master Fong, for you.*" He offered the vanilla envelope he had been tasked with delivering to the Triad member amusing himself with being an assassin recently, along with a half bow.

The Storm he vaguely recalled but hadn't interacted with directly that often and apparently hadn't immediately recognized him as expected curiously took the paper from him. A second to pop free the cheap tin clasp, and the man quirked an eyebrow at the results of the exam his little sister had taken a few weeks ago as they slid from their confines. "*Ah! I see...*"

"*My patron has extended an invitation if you so choose, to catch up with the individual in question and deliver the news yourself.*"

Amusingly, the martial artist perked up even more as he returned the test scores to their packet before anyone could glimpse what it was over his admittedly tall shoulder. "*...I believe I will take up that offer. You'll have to excuse Wen, he's new.*"

Straightening up, the Lackey shot the wounded man cringing over his 'abused' hand still pinned to a wall a moderately chiding look for his misbehavior. "*Very well.*"

"*If you were expecting something, why didn't you say something?*" The so named 'Wen' hissed out, apparently pain had not improved his disposition any to accept the public reprimand.

Well, as public as a Triad-controlled teahouse could be.

"*This is not a delivery I expected, but a consideration I appreciate.*" Claimed the man with the longest braid in the room patiently, as if the miscommunication was not a great imposition to any of them nor what looked to be great entertainment for the rest of the room. "*Your haste in 'establishing' yourself was bound to get you in trouble sooner or later... be thankful the one to teach you better was so mild. He could've electrocuted you fully or aimed for the throat.*"

Sliding the slightly oversized envelope into his sleeve without needing to crease the contents, the Storm very smoothly rose to his feet from a cross-legged position and stepped down from the slightly raised platform that kept the patrons of this establishment off the floor. Another step had him in range to grip the knife and yank it from his fellow Triad member, only to return it to the Lackey hilt first.
"The address, and public methods to arrive at the location, are included in that packet." Björn offered for the consideration, even if he had to sacrifice his handkerchief to clean the blood off the metal before returning it to the reinforced holster under his suit jacket. "As well as a phone number for the estate, local resources between modest residential areas, and other bits of information that may prove useful for your trip."

He earned himself a short nod as the Storm went on his way peacefully, as if someone wasn't bleeding from the hand nor a solidly northern European was standing in the middle of a firmly far eastern associated eatery.

"…furthermore." The Icelander informed the Chinese man he had wounded rather archly, tapping his tiepin and the black alchemical symbol it displayed against his chest with a fingernail. "This should have informed you I am part of the island's army of staff. My business is Mafia Land's, obstructing me is not viewed upon kindly."

Even if he was on personal business, it was upholding the reputation that was important. If he was on his Lady's tasks or not he had only a mandate from the island's ruling council to report any 'complications' in his day to day life.

The fact he was a Lackey and had a tie pin or button to wear the official symbol for the island but not the patch sewn into clothing over the left breast, had no effect on his role as a staff member of Mafia Land. It only proclaimed another paid him and what tasks he prioritized if asked for assistance, and the rest of the time he spent shoring up his patron's commitment to the island's services as a contracted agent.

He wore the button on a simple shirt with shorts to cope with the heat here until Viper hammered 'business dress being respectful to both his patron and those he needed to deal with' very pointedly. Frankly, dressing like a businessman had cut short some of the attitude he had to deal with that even the mark of a Mafia Land agent hadn't solved for him.

Impressive what simply adopting another 'appearance' could do.

To the moderately unnerved look he was now getting from Wen, he who desperately needed a dentist, the Mafia Land Lackey tipped an imaginary hat and turned on a high polished heel to return to his usual duties.

Tyr the Sword Emperor had sent the promised additional money by using one of his own assassins as a courier, and he had a few plans for it until the usual ways generated enough cash to cover his recent mistake. All of which was more important to him than picking fights where he didn't need to with some of his lady's Asian contacts.

Björn, though he had long grown used to the odd traffic and occasionally violent sights of Mafia Land's streets, still hesitated when he realized someone was waiting for him a few doors down. Fong made it obvious it was the Lackey he was waiting on more than anyone else by staring straight at him with his naturally red eyes, then inclining his head to the 'main' main street as if asking if the Lackey intended to go that way or to summon him forward.

"…concerns?" Inquired the Lightning-Storm after a moment and once they were in range to speak instead of shout over the noise of the crowd and the occasional fight breaking out in odd corners. "Questions?"

"Thank you." Stated the martial artist simply instead of anything he half expected. "I did not expect to be kept in the loop where she was concerned."
"You would be better suited to thank her. Dama inquired if she wanted you to know first herself and furthered her wishes to me." Corrected the Lackey, not ungratefully but still politely. "Why thank me now?"

"Ah… there were more than just Wo Hop To members in there." Temporized the Storm smoothly, which didn't quite temper that edge of razor thin amusement his features gained. "You might have just helped my aims there more than you realized, simply delivering this in person and not so much as hinting at how innocent it really is."

Well, damn. "The first one is free. I charge for repeats."

"I will bear it in mind." Promised Fong, with a still shallow incline of his head again, before he joined the flow of traffic to get where he wanted to go easily.

Bjørn made an annoyed sound, aiming himself more for one of the underground entrances to get back to the apartment he nearly had entirely to himself for the next month at least.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 13th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Afanasii found her a new pipe while she had been gone.

Sonya, very nearly immediately upon being presented with it, used the packet of shredded tobacco he also got her to light it and tossed the half-beaten pack of Marlboros she had been smoking since she broke her old one into the closest trash bin.

Leaving Shamal to wash the dogs after their almost week-long jaunt in the countryside, because tobacco smoke was not good for little lungs. Tatiana helped her brat, which is why she didn't remotely feel guilty to not do it herself.

Alek was still a puppy, and while she was getting slightly more confident in handling tiny or easily broken things… not by that much. Tiny puppy bones breaking was not a feeling she wanted to know, but the dog didn't seem to mind her rather stiff affection for him.

"That's still really bad for you." The nurse pointed out, a little harsher than normal but then again Marco had just shook out his fur in spite of Shamal asking him not to politely and flung soap everywhere over the two of them.

"…Tats, I can assure you, it's less bad for me than most habits." At least it wasn't opium. Taking another stronger draw on the bone and wood churchwarden style pipe, the Storm-Cloud let out a very smoky sigh. "Besides, without the chemicals they put into cigarettes, this is a lot less bad than the usual ways I can get a nicotine hit."

"What chemicals?"

"Tobacco is a plant." Sonya pointed out slowly. "It dries out, faster if you shred it to thin strips to pack into paper tubes. Yet, when I open a new pack of cigarettes, the tobacco doesn't fall out like a pile of plant dust. Not even after a few days, when the plastic has been peeled off and the box opened a few times there's only a little loose tobacco at the bottom of those packs. Ever wonder why?"

Her sister tossed her a deadpan look, rubbing Alek's paws clean even if he whined and squirmed in her hands. "That's disgusting. Do you know what chemical they're putting into it?"
"Not a fucking clue." Hence, she really liked the pipe tobacco method of getting a nicotine hit. Less chance she was inhaling something derived from petroleum and she could then grow her own tobacco and not need to worry about it.

"Why would you even do that to yourself?"

"I have an addiction." Sonya countered next, a little bluntly. "I've had an addiction for a few years now. I'm not unaware of it, Tats. But in the list of things I could've done to take a tiny bit of the edge off and not default to ‘typical' Cloud habits like mass destruction or the occasional murder… nicotine is a fairly minor annoyance. Using a pipe makes it easier to control the quality myself, over pre-made cigarettes or cigars. It's like alcohol, really. More addictive and less mood altering, but both are cultivated specifically for recreational purposes."

Tatiana gave her the look she felt that deserved, and mulishly bent back to scrubbing her puppy back to his original coat colors instead of the muddy brown he arrived as.

Alek's pale fur showed a disturbing amount of dirt and dust, and while the dog was perfectly fine with that being the case she wasn't so happy with that fact. Keeping her puppy at least modestly clean had been quite the chore the last handful of days.

While the brushing was entirely playful for Alek, the scrubbing apparently was turning out to be a little traumatizing for the poor puppy. He, and his brother under Shamal's hands, whined pitifully and whimpered as the dog-safe shampoo was worked through their fur only to be rinsed out with careful cups of clean if likely chilly water.

Her brat looked entirely unhappy with the whole production of washing the puppies. Sonya probably should keep an eye out for any attempts to keep Marco clean via Mist Flames and foil it, because that might certainly be unhealthy for the puppy.

"How are the new hires going?" She changed the subject a bit pointedly, but they had been over her one nasty habit before and arguing about it got rather old quicker than anything else ever did.

Her sister snorted, hauling one of the apparently new towels being sacrificed to the puppy bath over and dumping it on top of a miserably wet and strangely deflated puppy to rub him mostly dry. "It's going. Somehow. I kind of feel sorry for Mrs. Tolmachyova, having to deal with a whole bunch of nervous girls not entirely sure if they can talk to her."

"…there shouldn't be any issues with being understood…"

"It's not that. Cultural things. Like one of the girls very nearly burst into tears just asking if they were allowed to 'come in late' for church and mass things tomorrow when she realized the woman wasn't Catholic. It was kind of disturbing."

"But… that was allowed by the acceptable 'Italian work contract' template we got copied from Cesare's old civilian ones. In fact, there shouldn't be any maids or whatever on the weekends."

"She didn't read the contract that closely." Deadpanned the nurse, whisking the towel off Alek playfully to the surprise of the animal. "And look at that, puppy! You're… well, mostly white again."

Sonya's puppy squinted a blue eye up at the redhead suspiciously, cautiously creeping out from under her kneeling position over him to retreat back to the thief that owned him. Tail firmly between his no longer so fluffy hind legs and all, only to paw pitifully at her calf and whine until she obligingly dumped his soaked ass into her lap so he could warm up a little.

"Oh, you drama queen." Huffed the nurse, rather insulted. "Bambino, you need any help?"
"I gotta take care of Marco myself, zia. But thank you." Running a hand which repelled water a tiny bit strangely through his dog's fur, the Mist carefully dropped the moisture to the brickwork under their knees as his puppy went back to his usual fluffy state. "Do you want me to dry off Alek, mamma?"

Sonya glanced down, and Alek glanced upward with his tiny wet nose pointed at the sky and almost peering at her upside down. "I guess, if only so he won't shiver off water in trails that might become hazardous."

It would make the dog seem less like a cross between a drowned rat and porcupine and more like the baby canine he really was, at least.

A week and a half of association or not, Alek was still somewhat wary of Shamal's person if not so spooked by him anymore. Puppy was even more unnerved by the kid actually using his Flames on him, but it only took two seconds for the dog to realize he was being dried off by said strange and unnatural feelings and not attacked.

The utterly baffled puppy kept shifting and wiggling in Sonya's lap, not able to jump out and escape because she held him down for it and frankly he wasn't really trying all that hard aside the shocked jerks from another part of his fur being forcibly dried out.

About when the Storm-Cloud's jeans were soaked with secondhand puppy water and Shamal drew off the last of the moisture from Alek's fur, her puppy apparently finally decided that while he might not like the Mist child personally that didn't mean he had to firmly stay out of reach.

The brat earned himself a half-hearted lick to the hand before the now fluffy furred dappled puppy wiggled free of her hold and firmly shoved himself under her thighs and the bench she was sitting on for the protection.

(Monday the 15th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Wide-eyed little rabbit girl, yes she had a name but damn if Sonya was going to bother to remember it until she managed to do more than squeak and be nervous around just about anyone not Italian, cautiously poked her head around the open doorway of the second floor sitting room. "Miss Bazanova?"

"What?"

The native girl hired as a maid dithered, annoyingly. "There are these three… thuggish men, at the door. One insists to speak with you. Should I get Mister Hawk to run them off?"

Urg… civilians. "Are they Italian? If so, yes. If not, a bit more detail."

She wasn't entirely sure why all the civilians they had so far greatly preferred dealing with Hawk and not any of the Russians, but maybe because they were explaining him away as another Frenchman. It was a good an origin as any, especially as Hawk could speak the language, if he couldn't pass as a native.

"Well… there's a blond, a brunette, and a rather dark-skinned man… with… tattoos..." Trailed off the girl after a moment to look up and obviously strain to recall details other than 'scary', only to look
back down and catch the slightly judgmental stare Shamal was aiming at her.

Her brat very pointedly, now she was watching, turned his head a fraction of a centimeter to stare blankly at the thief's right bicep. Where there was a fairly broad tattoo covering most of the outside of, fully visible since she was wearing a sleeveless shirt today due to armor fitting needs a bit earlier that morning.

"...on his hand?" Tried the maid to cover the start of her embarrassment for not recalling a few esoteric facts about half the Russians in the castle, now fidgeting with her fingers as she fruitlessly strove to ignore her now burning red face. "He claimed his name was Dmitriy, an old friend of yours?"

"You should've started with that. Names, details. Then if you think they're 'disreputable'." Sonya instructed a little irritably, pushing up from the floor where she and Shamal had been parsing through a Greek encyclopedia on spiders. "Shamal..."

"I'll stay here, mamma." Her brat offered, snagging the entire book. "I'll work on my vocabulary."

...he wasn't the one that needed it.

She was well past the developmental point learning languages was easier by sheer flexible brain development as she grew, now she had to really work on memorizing and automatically translating words herself since she had been stuck with a set of languages for a couple years without change. Shamal was, depressingly, picking up much more than she was just by translating words back and forth to dissect sentence structure.

"Sure. I'll be back as soon as I can." Alek, having long since leapt down from his napping spot and more than ready to go somewhere else with her, was perfectly happy to be scooped up instead of allowed to walk himself.

If Sonya didn't pick her dog up, the maids would try to pet him.

As it turned out, the pale puppy actually just wasn't that sociable with new people. He'd hold still and allow pets if you insisted, but kind of grudgingly and he'd escape to her vicinity as soon as he could. Unlike Marco, who delighted with any and all attention regardless of who was petting him and would just melt into a spastic ball of puppy fur with a glancing brush of his belly.

It made her wonder if there wasn't some shepherd breed in the dogs, or some other highly territorial but not distinctly unfriendly canine bloodline that mixed unequally in the two brothers.

Taking the stairs a little hastily, because she hadn't seen her old childhood friend in at least a year and it'd be nice to catch up with him when an utterly nasty situation wasn't pending for her to correct, Sonya let the dog down to the ground once they were in the foyer and dug out her disassembled pipe from her pocket at the same time. A few twists had the bone bowl of the pipe reattached to the stem, and she experimentally stuck her finger into the bowl to check it was still packed before opening her front door.

Then she blinked at the whole group. "...I'm pretty sure you should be back in Khimki, Ziven."

"Timur's seeing how well he'll do on his own for a bit." The hand-to-hand combat specialist informed her cheerfully, or at least not particularly unpleasantly. "For-

"Does he know it's to 'let you go' from being his Tutor? Because if not, I'm not surprised he let you go." Clouds were territorial little shits. She'd know.
Ziven took in a breath as if he had something to say, hesitated as he thought, then shut his mouth for a few seconds and then gave her a bright smile. "Well... I guess we'll see when I get back."

Lighting her pipe with the finger in contact with the tobacco, Sonya pointed the stem at Nicolai instead of taking a drag. "I'm also pretty certain my sister doesn't want to talk to you, or at least not yet."

"I still need to speak with Adrik. And maybe Galina, though I think she's found herself something better."

In fact, given Ganauche had come by and all but begged Tatiana to put off a few of the checkups for the criminally inclined adults for a lunch date with him, she was pretty sure her sister was going out of her way to avoid him. If the Lightning Guardian had arrived so hastily with that news, she wouldn't be surprised.

Nudging the puppy out from between her feet, she took a step out onto her own front stoop now the doorway was open. "Straight back, head down the right-hand hallway. First immediate left is the dining hall, stay there until they come to you for lunch. The chef's an Italian Mafioso and assassin, and older than us. Try not to piss him off."

Alek went right back to standing between her boots, pointedly staring down the vory the best he could from a height below her knees. It wasn't really working out for him, because two barely noticed him and the last was way too amused as they hung out and just waited.

"So," Dmitriy eventually posed, rubbing a thumb against the tattoos around two of his right-hand fingers, "the more shit changes, huh?"

Sonya made an agreeing noise, ignoring the sting of tobacco smoke on her vocal cords as she blew out her first pull of the day. "The problem is that I really have no desire to help nor goodwill for your Pahkan, Dmitriy."

"I'm not asking you to have any." Countered the Rain a touch pointedly, because before he got jailed the two of them were kind of friends in a way too. "I'm asking you to have a bit of goodwill for me."

"A bit of an oversimplification." She countered equally as pointedly. "Anything I do to help you will help him. I tried, Dmitriy. Honestly. He decided, on his own, to burn through what little tolerances I had."

He flatly scowled at her, without a whole lot of heat. "I got both sides, Sonya. From vor Arseniy and him-"

"Then allow me to say 'check with Pyotr', or even old man Milos himself if he's still alive." Cut off the thief blandly. "He's been outright ignoring his mistakes before I even left-"

"Sonya, I get it. You two will probably loathe each other until hell freezes over." Dmitriy cut back in impatiently. "And I'll probably never get all the details. Fine, whatever. Ignoring the Pahkan there's still your parents, your sister, me, and maybe two or so more in Adrik and Ziven. There's what you built up for your foster mother, what you started with me, and keeping things at least in a loop for dangers or risks involved with our abilities than just expressly for the Zolotov clan. Please."

"And where does that leave me? Helping someone I know for a fact will abuse what I can pass on in hopes of protecting a good half of my family from stupid shit I know he will do with it?" She pulled the pipe stem out of her mouth and pointedly jabbed it in his direction, not his chest because that would be utterly stupid of her. "I can't do that Dmitriy, a lot of what we've been getting into recently
outside the gemstone shit is stupidly abuse-prone. Why the hell, beyond the fact we're old friends from childhood, would I help arm someone I wouldn't trust with a broken gun with the information to twist young Flame users to bad aims before they can protect themselves?"

"I don't need that shit! I need the 'it's possible for a Mist to work from up close' and 'Storms can burn through Mist shit' crap. Leave the kiddies to your foster mother."

"That is what I planned on doing. There's no reason for me not to tell Arseniy what he'd want to know."

"...right. I knew that." Dmitriy ran an exasperated tattooed hand through his short-cropped hair, giving in with an explosive sigh.

"I don't mean to catch you between your loyalties to the clan and an old friend who set you up for your position," relented the thief just a small bit, "but frankly...?"

The Rain, with an aggravated groan, let his ass hit the porch railings which hopefully wouldn't leave rust-streaks on his pants and rubbed his face with both hands. "Sonya, anything you could think to help me not bite it horribly might be nice. So much of this shit went sideways so damn fast on me. I'm not that good at keeping on top of it."

"I've already structured the brats and stuck them under my mother." She pointed out flatly. "Beyond that, I've pruned back what you're responsible for so it wouldn't reach the ridiculous numbers I had to deal with. What more do you want?"

"Not to be hung out to dry on my lonesome?" He countered dryly, a more than just a little bitterly. "I didn't exactly expect to be given such a fucking high-profile job after being trained up to fix cars for my 'career'. My first student's dead from shit we couldn't prevent and I had to ask you to do it, you've stolen my bitchy secretary, left a piece of ancient porn in my desk, and somehow my fucking lamp has gone for a walk-about... I liked that lamp."

"That was an ugly-ass lamp. I tossed it out the window just before I left for hurting my eyes."

"Wait. Wait. It survived to the very last day, only for you to toss it out of a window?"

"Yes."

The vor flat out growled at her, only for the puppy between her legs to snarl back. Alek, hilariously, was better at it than the human man was at making it sound threatening.

Eying the puppy between her boots curiously, Dmitriy glanced back up with a raised eyebrow. "Didn't take you for a dog person, Sonya."

"I will give you a bottle of vodka if you'll shut up about that ugly-ass lamp." Sonya offered instead of explaining where her puppy had come from and why she hadn't got him herself.

"It was a great lamp!"

"It was a fucking eyesore."

"It was stained glass."

"Of absolutely nothing. There was no pattern, just chips of green glass cemented to other chips to make a lopsided shade. I know for a fact you didn't get it from anyone important, you probably nicked it from some other idiot who completely forgot they had that monstrosity." She countered
without much heat.

Dmitriy scowled at her. "Give me my damn vodka."

"I said if you'd shut up about it. Which you didn't." Reaching down to pick up her very grumpy puppy, Sonya tucked him up under her arm and turned to open up the door yet again. "But if you're going to bitch so, I guess I can share a few that Lisa brought down with her."

He huffed, a smirk now fighting valiantly against the attempt to keep a straight face. "Well... nice to know that as shit changes some people remain firmly the same."

"Did you expect me to change?" Sonya shot back over a shoulder skeptically, only to twitch as the man poked her left hip with his two tattooed fingers. "The fuck?"

"Might not have changed a lot when it comes to your personality, but you sure as shit have physically." Offered the Rain pointedly as he followed her in, glancing warily around the entrance hall of her castle as he obligingly shutting the doors behind him and taking a curious peek into Tatiana's abandoned aid station. "The place? That has also changed a fuck of a whole lot too from what I expected."

"I know I lost a lot of muscle tone, you don't have to rub it in." She snapped back half-heartedly, crooking her fingers at her brat suspiciously watching them come in from the second-floor landing. "Come on, brat. This is an old friend of mine who finally decided to drag his ass out of prison."

"I got released, and it wasn't like I could've walked out on my own steam."

"You could've, had it been that important to you."

The vor tisked instead of answer, getting more interested in Marco bounding almost head first down the stairs to get pets from the new person who obviously would want to pet his furry head and not break his neck. "I think I'm starting to see why you've got a little yappy rat. Three of them, in fact."

Her brat, curiously enough, didn't immediate take that as some kind of invitation to be friendly as he had with most other Russians who viewed him skeptically at first. Marco immediately disappeared before he could reach the new person or the landing of the staircases, ending up exactly where Shamal was peering at her old childhood friend so closely and utterly confused by it. "I'm fine up here, mamma."

"Um... okay? Lunch should be soon, kiddo." Shamal hadn't been quite so reserved on meeting anyone from Cesare to her own foster father, what in the world was his objection to meeting one of her old friends? The Mist gave an aggravated sigh, slumping his way down the stairs in a way that was probably bad for his knees. "Fine."

Dmitriy snickered. When she glanced back at him in askance, the Rain rapidly shook his head and held up both hands. "Oh hell no. I am not remotely paid enough to deal with that. Have at yourself, Sonya."

"Did you want a bottle of liquor or not?"

"Not even for that." He dismissed, taking the advice she gave the other two vor and wandering off down the hall to the dining room and barely getting a stride away from her before snickering.

When she turned back, her brat looked distinctly pleased with himself for whatever he just pulled off
and blinked innocently up at her as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "What did you need, mamma?"

Sighing, because she had the suspicion that he wasn't ever going to give her a straight answer about what just happened without a few years of work at it, she just batted a hand at him. "I'm going to go catch Dmitriy up with things since he's taking back his position I covered for him, brat. You'll have to excuse me, we'll read more just before bed. Okay?"

Brat hugged her around the waist, then pulled a nervous Alek out of her arm only to let him drop to the floor as he wanted instead of being held by a Mist. "I'll take the dogs for a walk then, just to the gates and back. We'll be back in time for lunch, mamma."

"Thanks, brat."

(Monday the 15th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"...um, Sonya?" Fiorella inquired a bit delicately as she paused on the top of the main floor staircase, apparently really unsure of the situation given the three empty bottles with Cyrillic writing standing out starkly from a white, green, and red label on the floor. "Are you... alright?"

'Alright' was probably pushing it. A bit gone to near-uselessness might actually cover the situation more, in Nilda's opinion. Not that she was remotely surprised, as from what a slightly distracted Tatiana informed them when the two of them arrived via the 'Mirror Lady's' reflection-paths her sister was catching up with an 'old friend'.

A week of lessons had shown the thief would be more likely to be already waiting for them while continuing young Mingxia's lessons, not entirely missing and her sister teaching the next steps in ballet to the young Chinese Rain.

Given the naturally swarthy skinned man quietly contemplating the new arrivals with carefully masked interests in spite of how much of the potato-or-rye-based liquor he might've drank, she'd like to spend a lot of quality time too with an 'old friend' who looked that rough and tumble but could keep his wits about him perfectly well. Interestingly, the man had less... artistic tattoos than the Russian sisters, or even Galina's modest shoulder work. More in line with 'Adrik's', yet also less colorful.

Stark black and blue that fuzzed slightly from something other than age around the edges of the lines, from around a few fingers to broad shoulders. Less clearly defined than the more colorful designs on the Russian women, which was... interesting.

The married woman very pointedly returned her attention to the situation and attempted to refrain from eyeing up Sonya's visitor.

"Mmm...?" Listing slightly sideways, and at first with little to no recognition, the thief blearily peered up at her expected guests. "Oh, right. I'm supposed to be teaching you ballet... how late did it get?"

"If you wanted some time to yourself, given current news... then I wouldn't mind!" Insisted Lady Vongola hastily, chewing on her bottom lip when an utterly blank look was aimed up at her. "Or... you still don't know..."

"Know what?"
Caught by her own haste, the Italian mother of three hesitated. "Um... perhaps right now isn't the best time."

The dusky-skinned man she shot a look at arched an eyebrow for the attention, draining the fourth bottle empty and letting it roll to the small pile of them starting up without addressing or asking why.

"But... Dmitriy doesn't speak Italian." Sonya pointed out logically, if still with drunken logic on a point that was very valid to give. "And what don't I know?"

"Ah... right now might not be the best time... but we kind of didn't tell you Saturday. Or Sunday. And if not today then..." Dithered the woman uncertainly, looking at her bodyguard but the Rain had nothing to help her with and could only shrug.

Sonya's usually bland features screwed up in complete confusion, which was a very big clue she had not been informed or seeking solace for a more than probably dead friend. "Fiorella... one second."

Pushing herself fully upright on the wrap around couch dominating the landing outside her bedroom, the Storm-Cloud focused on something probably internal than out a window. A press of heated air, a rather fiery belch with actual suspiciously red Flames that had a distinct whiff of the drink preferred by Russians, and she pulled herself to her feet shockingly steadily as if she didn't drink any of four tall bottles of vodka. "Oomph... heartburn. Okay, do that again now I'm not so drunk."

Under the wide-eyed stare from not only Fiorella but a highly skeptical one from her old friend, she rolled her eyes.

"Any and all Flame users are immune to their own Flames. If you take in something harmful for you, you can burn it out of your own system. Sort of." Another second of thought, and she shrugged the whole topic off. "I've horribly oversimplified the whole thing, but it's the general gist. We haven't quite got the limitations and drawbacks worked out just yet, and there's a shit ton of them depending on your mindset while so compromised, so be careful if you use that Mrs. Silvery-White."

"...would it happen to work on colds?"

"No, viruses eventually become 'part of you' by how they spread and the process of making you sick. Unfortunately. If you don't get to it early, and that would be well before you showed any kind of symptom, you'll still get sick." A lift of a shoulder for a shrug made it rather apparent that some of the vodka she had drank before this was still affecting her for it was if not smoother than a tiny bit more relaxed that the woman was normally. "You can stave things off if you're aware of it, though. Tats used it to avoid getting pneumonia herself for a short while."

...even more perfect, Sonya was actually in an apparently rare good mood. Enough to share some of what her fellow Russians had rediscovered about Flame usage without drawing it out into a long question and answer session first.

Fiorella was now utterly reluctant to finally pass on the possibility Mafioso Sinclair had met with an unfortunate end, even if they were strangely enough still awaiting confirmation on that. No one quite wanted to contest the police treating the whole event as an unfortunate fire, just exactly where they would want to see a good section of a city destroyed, and see what information there really was to be had about the situation.

The continued lack of any news on several Mafia gangs and Sinclair himself didn't really lend itself to another possibility. You couldn't injure a Sun Flame user that experienced with injury or burns for long and as Sinclair had forcibly taken over another syndicate aiming to ruin him before, so he should've been well aware that he needed to resurface almost immediately afterwards if he had been
going for a 'you can't put me down, I'll destroy you instead' kind of reputation gain.

Nilda honestly couldn't blame her charge or anyone nearby for not being that interested to find out the truth in a hurry in the least, even if the longer the situation continued the more awkward it would be in the end.

"So now, what is this about what I should know but apparently don't... in which getting drunk off my ass in the middle of the day would entirely be a proper response?" Questioned the ash blonde curiously, raising both eyebrows when her scheduled visitors exchanged a look instead of answer. "...okay."

"Is that it? I mean... I knew we probably should've let you know it was a possibility Saturday, but no one knew if it was or wasn't the case." Fiorella vented, rather energetically now that the topic had been finally been raised and she could get her worry off her chest. "So we put it off, just to see if the information improved any. But then we didn't get that, so we didn't tell you yesterday. And it hasn't improved our understanding any, but it's more and more likely that the longer things go without so much as a-

"Fiorella." Interrupted Sonya a bit flatly, obviously confused but now a bit of caution was entering her features the more the Lady Vongola blurted out the background situation. "I've recently become aware that sometimes I just can't know what's going on for reasons. If it's that major, then... this once, I'll give you permission not to tell me until it's either unavoidable or it's safer for everyone. As long as it's that important when I do find out."

The other woman winced, especially as the topic of that vent was the death of the individual that helped her realized that and even the oblique mention made it apparent the thief was utterly unaware of the questionable status of her fellow godparent.

"This weekend." Decided Nilda for all of them. She might not want to be part of those that informed the Storm-Cloud what was going on, but her charge would fret until it was solved so she had to suck it up. "Even if the information doesn't improve any and all we have is a 'possibility'. We'll tell you then."

"Fine." She rolled her neck to crack it a little, glancing out the nearest window curiously. "Then I guess we should move this downstairs and see about your lessons, Fiorella."

"What about your friend?" The Rain had been without 'company' a little too long, as delightfully competent as her husband was... he wasn't interested in her physically and that did force an interesting clause in their marriage contract about 'dalliances'. A 'visiting', possibly Flame-able, Russian who was probably one of their Mafiosi-like ranks, and could exert that much self-control even that far gone on alcohol?

"...oh yeah." Extending a hand to him, Sonya showed absolutely no strain from hauling the man a few inches taller and at least another quarter of her weight to his feet. "You asked about him before. This is vor Dmitriy, the current head of the Zolotov clan Flame office. I kind of covered for him while he was in prison for a couple years, and he was the head of the Rains before the guy I killed who Larion eventually took over for. Eventually."

"Ladies." Drawled the ex-convict smoothly, the only sign of how compromised he might've been in the slight sway to his posture now he was standing on his own.

...Nilda did not need the encouragement, thank you Sonya.

"I thought you said he doesn't understand Italian, Sonya? But it's still a delight to make your
acquaintance... um, vor Dmitriy." Fiorella greeted with real pleasure, and apparently either missing the political value in the contact the other blonde had at hand or keeping it in mind but not making herself seem too eager to make him a contact herself. "Welcome to Italy, even if only for a few days."

"He doesn't speak it. I forgot the Mists had laced the castle to help those inside understand one another, especially as there's about four 'main' languages for the residents... excuse me, five. Usov's translating, if you wanted to know."

Ah. Good, a downside. Aside trying to either dodge or avoid her marital situation while sizing up what probably wasn't just an 'old' friend but a childhood one if you took the thief's real age into account.

Involving a child, even a Mist one, in a seduction attempt would be rather crass and rather inhumane of her.

"Or maybe the Mirror Lady is... I forget when they agreed to switch off for the night."

...for fuck's sake!

"...Nilda dear? Are you alright?" Fiorella inquired rather sweetly, although thankfully she didn't seem to have caught what her distraction was.

"Sonya? You wouldn't happen to have something stiff to drink left around, would you?" Inquired the Italian Rain a little exasperatedly, deciding it would be safer to pretend a sudden headache than admit her recent train of thought.

"I might... I've got another bottle of vodka somewhere..." She glanced over near her friend, then scowled down at the number of bottles on the tiled floor. "...or not. I think Cesare can get you a glass or bottle of wine, but the bees are a little too new to take some of their honey from to brew any mead just yet."

"Is wine any good?" Dmitriy questioned curiously, stretching a bit languidly as he wandered to the staircase himself to relocate somewhere else. "Never tried it."

"Eh... it can be, but often it's just overly sour and gritty." Dismissed Sonya without waiting for either Italian woman to defend their preferred drink, earning herself an amused if playfully disappointed look from her mother's student. "No offense, Fiorella."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 15th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Will you fucking talk to me now?"

"Why?" Tatiana threw back shortly, more than a little irritated and a bit more annoyed to go along with the beginning pangs of shoring up the physical health of a mother of three attempting to get fit in a fast hurry. She was pretty sure she knew how the entire thing was going to go, and frankly she couldn't be bothered to dig into that much angst without a stiff drink or three. "I broke up with you, Nicolai. I've got a different career, a different life, now. You, and Moscow, don't fit. Why, the hell, would I bother to listen to what you've already tried and we both know I don't want?"

Sonya glanced backwards, but at least remained more helpful than most by turning back to saying goodbye to both Fiorella and her bodyguard before the Mirror Lady took them back through the Constructed mirror.
Ganauche had explained the most they, meaning Vongola, knew of the situation to her over an early lunch. Tall, dark, and snarky very probably bit off more than he could chew, and instead of extract himself to heal up and let things escape to fester apparently the hitman had decided to deal with all of it now. Even if it would kill him, just so nothing of his baggage would come after the newly moved in godmother or the kid they both minded.

It was pretty understandable, and kind of admirable in a 'responsible father role model figure' kind of way. At the very least, taking it all on before it hurt her sister or adorable shit of a nephew was.

However, Sonya probably wouldn't take the murder of her best friend very well. Given what she'd do when one of the little minions she was tasked with protecting got 'inconvenienced' a fraction as much?

Those stupid, battered boots… her baby sister apparently didn't do grief too well. Getting the story was obviously hard on her, and that was an old civilian who match bitch with bitch with the younger thief for a few years.

All that history with the guy, the time and the arguments to find a comfortable middle ground, gone in an instant. There was going to be regrets, because whatever feelings the thief had for her main 'squeeze' the fact he was kind of angling for more but she never even tried it would raise a few more wrinkles to be sore over.

Nilda the Rain bodyguard informed her quietly that 'they'd tell her this weekend, even if the information didn't improve'. Which was nice for them and all, but Tatiana wanted to be sure her little sister was given at least a heads up on the situation before requiring to react in public. Springing it on her in front of others was kind of really fucking rude, and it would be better coming from someone a lot more important to her than just new contacts she had locally.

"You broke up with me behind prison bars. I think I kind of deserve a bit more effort than that." Countered the vor a bit bitterly, not budging from blocking the way out of the back hall and to the dining hall.

At least, he remained there until Sonya very pointedly pushed him easily out of their way.

"You decided you had the right to tell me what I could or couldn't do. With my life. No discussion, no realization I might have feelings or desires myself, just what you wanted." Countered the Sun sarcastically. "I don't think you deserve a bit 'more' than that."

"You didn't say anything!" Nicolai bit out.

"Excuse me. Tats, can you have that argument somewhere a little removed?" Her baby sister interrupted yet again, both hands gripping the back of the shirts on two young Rains who were looking a little conflicted.

Mingxia and Larion exchanged a look, shifting uncomfortably in the Storm-Cloud's hands as she got a tiny bit more pissed and apparently her ex realized his temper was actually a bit more unmanageable than two seconds ago.

"Shit. Yeah, Nya. We'll go outside. If he insists."

"Over here, brats." Dmitriy called from a kitty-cornered table with a half-drained wine bottle on it, drunk or not he was still sharp-eyed and perfectly aware of what was going on. "I've got a couple tricks for you."
Nicolai rolled his really broad shoulders as he adjusted himself in the face of more Flame-based 'meddling', then pointedly gave her an expectant look. "A word, then. Tatiana. If you would be so kind…?"

"That really does shit for your whole argument." She informed him a touch bitchily, but he really had some shitty timing with this bullshit. Passing him and giving old man Yaozu an encouraging smile so he'd know Dmitriy really did have something to teach his little girl that would help her and not anything else nefarious no one would like, she headed for the kitchens.

Cesare, being her most favorite Italian assassin ever, already had her post-exercise pick-me-up ready and waiting. He looked more than a little unimpressed himself, probably from what little he heard of the situation, but passed on the fruit smoothie he made up for her to recoup her caloric expenditure quickly and put a lid on the thick vegetable soup for afterwards to keep it warm. All without a word, and somehow it impressed his disdain of the situation she had on to anyone who bothered to pay attention.

Seriously, Ganauche needed to learn to cook. She would not be shy about jumping him every day if he'd cook her a meal every now and again.

A mouthful of something heavy with strawberries and blueberries had some major soothing effects on her mild healing-caused hunger pangs, which helped her to face this conversation she really didn't want to get into but was apparently going to be forced on her anyways. "So. What the fuck do you want, Nicolai?"

"I'm sorry for trying to order you around. Okay?" He insisted as he followed her out the kitchen's back door,

Tatiana busied herself with sucking more of the high sugar drink down and let the silence speak for her.

"You want to actually participate in this conversation or what?"

"What choice do I have?" She countered flatly, lowering the tall glass of frosty calorie dense drink before she gave herself brain freeze with it. "You wanted this, and more, and I don't. I don't get what you think this is going to do for you, aside more irritation and hurt for the both of us. But hey, you're both the man and the vor. What you want is right and anything else, like what I might want, is 'wrong'."

"That's not-"

"That's exactly what you tried, dictating what I was going to do while you were in jail." She interrupted shortly before he could go down that whole rabbit hole again. "I believe your exact words was 'why bother?' when I mentioned maybe learning to formally heal."

"You decided that yourself without speaking with anyone." Nicolai countered with little humor or patience left in his tone. "You picked up some first-aid books, and that worked. You were learning it anyways. Getting into some civilian establishment would've been more of a fucking headache than we could afford at the time."

"Bull fucking shit. You knew, perfectly well, the only safes I got to crack were the ones I got to practice on. I was functionally useless aside yet another pair of hands and even then, you weren't using all of us every job. My picking up triage hand guides was just to put it off and find a thing to do while Galina and I helped you boys get as far as you were going to go." Tatiana held up a hand before he tried the expected rebuttal. "Yeah, you were busy, and we were getting hunted at the time."
Stressful, I know. I was there healing up the shit that went wrong. Flat out ignoring me when I talked was a little asshole-ish of you."

"You. Didn't. Say. Shit." He insisted flatly. "No, I did listen to you Tatiana. You talked about maybe taking a few classes and putting in time as a volunteer to sneak into the civilian side's hospitals to learn a 'few more things'. Nothing about heading off to fucking Mafia Land to intern at the hospital there."

"I didn't learn that was possible until the end." She countered equally as shortly. "And by then? You weren't talking to me about anything beyond 'can you go here and distract this'. Sorry, Nicolai, I don't do that well as just the 'bed warmer'. I need a bit more than that, and if you're not going to give it then I'll find someone who will."

"Then maybe you should've spoke up. Make it into something I fucking understood as important to you and not just something you were getting into for shits and giggles."

"Because what I was doing for my career after you boys got arrested or whatever was so much less important to you than your crime spree." Concluded Tatiana a bit grimly, unhappy to have that suspicion confirmed. "It shouldn't be something I have to point out with flashing lights, Nicolai. I liked to talk, I need to speak with people more than 'how are you? Fine? Good' shit. Had you spared me a second or two of time, I would've laid everything out well before it became an issue. But... you weren't interested. Near the end, neither Galina nor I got more than a couple words aside from each of you."

"Because you didn't say it was that important to you. I'm not a mind-reader, Tatiana!"

"I don't need a fucking mind-reader!" She bit back. "I need someone who will fucking talk to me. Which would've taken care of our damn problems!"

Nicolai took in a deep breath, fixing his attention on the horizon out over the cliff side, then aimed a forcibly patient look back down at her. "Okay. Fine. If I promise not to get distracted by the whole 'we're days from being arrested' shit-"

"No. I moved on. I suggest you do too." She didn't need to do that backslide. Nicolai was comfortable, sure, but because she had a lot of history with him and not just because she was that in to him. Most of that old history was good, with a few little sour bits in the back, but if she went back to old habits there was no real reason to expect him not to go back to old habits. "And no, it's none of your business who it is."

By the look he gave her, he would apparently love to beg to differ.

"Fuck. Nicolai, we tried. It didn't work out. Let's just leave it there." Insisted the nurse more than a little tiredly, because as she thought this wasn't going anywhere.

"What if I don't want to?" Questioned the vor a little more than bitterly. "I'm sorry I didn't meet your expectations when we were all a little pressed for any kind of spare time, but that doesn't mean I want a different woman."

"That's only cute if the woman wants the same thing. Lisa didn't leave Arseniy because she had a problem with him, she left because she had personal problems and that was just where she was going while he served time. Arseniy went back for her because he still wanted her, and she had no problems with it. They both wanted the same thing, and to give up her career for him he found her the closest thing to what she wanted where he would like her. That works. This? I have issues with you, Nicolai. I want something else. What I'm doing? Can be done anywhere but I don't want you,
so I'm going to do it where I want to."

"So, what about what I want, Tatiana? Do I just automatically mean less to you?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not about to make myself miserable just so you can be happy. That'll more than likely just make us both miserable and unhappy." She refused, probably a little harshly. "I still seriously don't know what you hoped to gain by forcing this conversation, which frankly with a little more time to let it settle might've been done without so much bitterness and you might've found something different by then. But I resent it, and the fact you can't take a fucking hint if it slapped you upside the head, which does not encourage me to be nice through this."

Tatiana was taking the lessons to heart, that she cared maybe a little too much and wouldn't bring up an issue when it happened because she didn't want to be a bother or add more stress to whatever was going on. That part was entirely her fault. It didn't excuse him from expecting more from her than she was remotely willing to give, and if he prioritized his career over her needs then that was his decision.

Perhaps not a conscious one, but one nonetheless.

Nicolai glanced away, obviously thinking a bit hard, before he suddenly turned away from her to go back to their other ex-gang members. "Fine. Fine, if that is what you think you want then fine."

…yeah, she didn't buy that for a second.

She sighed heavily the moment she was alone, glancing down at the half of fruity coolness in her hands. A good portion of it melted due to the late evening heat, the sun having set or not.

"So… that's what you meant by 'sometimes you want different things'?"

"Something like that." She avoided dryly, sipping a bit more of her drink down before deciding to bite into the conversation instead of continuing to deny there was a problem. "It wasn't either of our faults, really. At the end, we were more just friends with benefits than actually involved with each other. Nicolai let it leech into our relationship, but he overstepped himself the last damn time when he gave me marching orders for while he was in jail. I didn't... I didn't speak up. About anything."

Sonya slithered down the side of her castle from the second-story window she had been obviously eavesdropping from. Tatiana didn't bother to feel annoyed, she would've done the exact same thing had her sister been equally as emotional about a conversation as she was right now.

Ganauche hadn't known Nicolai was nearby, otherwise he probably would've lingered to help her a little. She was pretty happy she decided to get involved with the Lightning well before she might've needed his help, because with how that started it could've gotten sticky too.

However, this whole debacle had just murdered off her desire to start her baby sister's angst early. She was going to do it all tonight anyways, because she knew full well she had an issue about putting things off and wasn't going to fall into that trap too.

Just… maybe after the brat went to sleep.

…and Sonya went through the bulk of what Lisa brought down for them with Dmitriy, while they both caught up on the office she just abandoned and he got back to then just celebrated his newly required freedom. Tatiana had to go find a good solid liquor for commiserating, if the vodka was out.

"I've got something to talk to you about, tomorrow." She informed her baby sister, a little wryly because as it turned out she was going to delay a bit anyways. "But for now, can we pretend that
"everything's fine?"

"Sure?" Agreed the Storm-Cloud a touch warily. "Is this the same 'we'll tell you later' that Fiorella and Nilda wanted to speak about? Because if you need time to prep, that's fine."

"No, it's not fine." She countered, pausing a second to be sure it was because she disliked this surprisingly passive turn in her sister's behavior when it came to something everyone didn't want to tell her because they were fucking afraid of her. "We're going over it tomorrow, so you can know. And pick how to react yourself, not let others manipulate you into reacting before those that wouldn't have your best interest in mind."

"…if you insist."

"Why don't you want to know?" Asked the nurse, actually now getting a little bewildered by this whole non-reaction to being told 'I can't tell you yet' without any real reason being given to explain it.

Sonya settled into one of the three stone benches removed from this old overlook patio in the back of her castle grounds, one of the others was positioned across from it and the last moved further down the drive to near the stable for dog walking needs, and leveled a very neutral gaze on her. "Because of Shamal. When he was sick, they had to do two spinal taps. One they did before I even got there, but then they had to do it again. What if I couldn't watch it but demanded that right as his godmother, then terrified the piss out of a nurse with a needle in his spine because of my reaction to it?"

Tatiana deflated a little bit, rubbing her face with one hand that had nicely cool condensation on it. "Fuck."

"…I know."

"…I think I want to cry."

Her usually prickly little sister slid over, settling in right next to her. "Yeah. I know."
(Tuesday the 16th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"I'm stealing your cook."

"Fuck you, that's my chef." Sonya snapped back absently, reading one part of the local newspaper and accepting the next section Tatiana finished to read once she was done with this one. "Get your own."

Dmitriy snorted at completely absent and automatic bitching aimed in his direction without actually being shot at him purposely. Apparently, he wasn't the first to try the suggested action.

The point remained. He was going to figure out how to steal Sonya's cook.

Almost two full years of prison food?

Then this?

The fact the man was a Mafioso and an assassin shouldn't be that much of an opposition. Really.

…maybe a little one, the vory wouldn't be too impressed with someone that ducked their due prison time. Half of Russia's criminal lifestyle was done in prison, most of those outside of it were either too damn new to earn their time or needed to hold key strategic positions to guide those going in or out of jail. Or just so happened to be needed on the outside to keep from losing a chunk of territory to whatever freshly released gang. A life-sentence would be ideal if you wanted to help your syndicate remain in power by recruiting more criminals out of prison to hold the territory right under the nose of the government, but that did take a lifetime of commitment.

Dmitriy took another bite of something flaky and buttery but looked like an overly large roll of pastry. With chocolate in it. Weird and amazing all at once, that this was acceptable for breakfast down here. "Nicolai's coming in with Ziven."

Sonya did twitch, a bit unhappily because most the Russians that knew her well were kind of waiting to see what she'd do in revenge for upsetting her big sister and she was fully aware of that. Tatiana huffed a bit sourly herself, pointedly fluffing out the newsprint in her hands as if that was more important to her.

"...you two are fucking boring in the morning." He offered, still getting little to no reaction.

Except for baby brat getting mothered by the younger sister, who shot him a sour look over his breakfast plate. He had no grounds to get short with him, because he had caught him sliding bits of his non-chocolate bread to his puppy flopped out under his feet and would totally call him out on it if he had to.

Suddenly Sonya bent her portion of the newspaper to pin him with a bland look over it. "How long are you sticking around, asshole?"

"Until I can get your 'chef' to come back to Moscow with me."

"Never." Answered the chef himself, sounding moderately amused, as he slid a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon in front of the Storm-Cloud and some fruit salad thing in front of the nurse. "I highly
"doubt you pay nearly as well as the Lovely Bossy Dragoness."

That was actually utterly true. He didn't get paid enough for taking care of his shit either. "Right. I'm moving in."

Sonya stared at him flatly for a long moment. "I'm kicking your ass out in three days."

"Still 'moving in'. Just for three days then." Dmitriy shrugged that off lazily, waving his half a bread roll in the air between them all. "The help to pack on the pounds again is really appreciated, Sonya."

She made a dissatisfied sound, pointedly eyeing his wrist. "Five then. Then you fuck off."

Ouch. He didn't look that bad…

He glanced down at his hands, and the wrist she was eyeing. While he hadn't ever been one of those oversized or skinny as a rake by nature, the fact remained that he was probably slightly underweight for a man his size. Two years of stale bread with boiled cabbage and maybe a scoop of beans added every other day hadn't been very healthy… but he hadn't dropped a significant amount of weight.

You could build up muscle in prison, there was literally little else to do during the day. It really meant you traded whatever store of fat into hard muscle, gaining weight was actually not that uncommon.

His wrist was maybe thinner, strangely. Just a little bit…

"Flame users have higher caloric intakes than most, Dmitriy." Tatiana explained for him without pulling her nose out of a record of local news. Oddly, it seemed to be the only local newspaper available given how many others had a copy themselves to read or dubiously glance over. "You've been probably slowly starving for two years, be careful what you eat for maybe the next year. You might over adjust instead of going back to a 'normal' level for your age and height. Aside the sudden things that go wrong, sometimes the human body is just that stupid."

"…do the kids know that?"

"Lisa does."

…good enough. Pressing a finger to his empty plate to shift it aside, Dmitriy set his elbows on the dining table and looked straight at Sonya. "Right, final thing. That white-blond from last night?"

"What about her?"

"…she's hitched, right?"

"Political. I swear to hell, Dmitriy, you make it awkward between me and a syndicate somewhere north of me and I'll break your arm." Muttered the thief rather sourly once she swallowed her mouthful. "Do you really need to 'get some'? Here? Now?"

"Two years in prison." He countered a little dryly. "You might be perfectly fine as the nun-thief of alabaster, but us lowly dirty humans have things like 'hormones'."

"Do you recall that conversation we had when you were fourteen and I was eleven?" She countered a little flatly, using a piece of crispy bacon as a pointer and gesturing from him to her and back again ignoring the fact he flushed a bit at that memory and now her sister looked fairly curious. "Pretty sure I told you more than you tried to tell me about that subject. Allow me to refer to where you told me to 'shove it' for the sake of your delicate 'virgin' ears."
"Okay, no. That was just surprising. I wasn't expecting it at the time." He defended himself, softly slapping a hand against his face as he tried to ignore that embarrassing memory. "That was just low-down dirty pool, girl."

"You tried shocking me with what you knew of?" Sonya cut herself off, glancing to the side and at the brat blinking innocently up at her. "...well. The fact I actually knew more than you means nothing, you started it."

"No, no, no. You are not telling me you knew more than a fourteen-year-old-boy about the subject of the horizontal tango when you were eleven." Tatiana suddenly interjected, looking a dangerous kind of gleeful. "Where the hell would you even learn that?"

"You know those books I like to take everywhere with me? Occasionally, some idiot sold me what is more commonly called 'housewife'... um..." Another glance to the little ears about. "Well, a housewife's version of those dirty 'men's' magazines. Just with words and not pictures. Kind of the type you're learning to read Italian on, and a lot more explicit."

"...oh. Oh." The Sun murmured, looking as if something very fundamental had been ripped out from under her. "...you dirty, dirty little girl, Nya. Wow. Really? You probably had one of those long before I found out there were actual picture magazines about... I gotta get me some of those... no wonder you liked to read so damn much. You could've told me."

Shamal, sliding his puppy another bit of bacon broken off the piece he accepted from his mother-figure to nibble on, now looked utterly confused at what they were talking about. He glanced over past his female role models, to another of the tetchy kids bolting breakfast for whatever aim they had for the day. Usov glanced over, a mischievous expression on his face, and mimed something with his hands in a position the sisters wouldn't see as one was turned away and the other had her sightlines blocked with some very generous assets.

The kid turned back to the table with a weirded-out expression on his face.

"I wouldn't bother. They really don't have very good plots."

"I don't give two flips for the plots, Nya."

"...that explains way too much, really." Sonya observed, only a tiny bit sarcastically.

"My taste in men is not the topic here, your taste in reading material is." Countered the older sister wickedly. "You don't throw out any books, and I've only seen you take umbrage with one in our entire lives. They're here, aren't they? Where are they? Give me one, I want to see this shit that made Dmitriy cringe."

Tactical retreat now or later?

Either one had a possibility of backfiring horribly. It was kind of like flipping a coin. Or gambling. Slinking away with his tail between his legs might be temporarily humiliating depending who was watching and wanted to know why later, but getting equally as loudly called out for shrinking from a topic in face of the sisters? Wouldn't matter the topic. It'd still gut his 'reputation'.

"I'm going to go walk the dogs, mamma." Shamal excused himself, waiting for the two seconds his godmother took to glance at his plate and be sure he was done eating his breakfast before ruffling his hair in thankfulness.
Dmitriy's salvation came in that same Italian chef he kind of really wanted to steal coming back with a fairly determined expression and nothing new to eat in hands. "Lovely Bossy Dragoness… a word?"

"I'll duck out for a bit here, then." Seized the Rain thankfully, aiming to get very far away from that table in a fast hurry.

"I need a few days. Slight emergency." Cesare explained to the woman paying him a salary for feeding a large number of people as he left the dining room. "If nothing is in fact wrong I will return with all due haste, but the situation is alarming enough I would appreciate leave to ensure the truth of the matter myself.

"Oh yeah." Tatiana responded instead of her younger sister. "We also need to talk tonight, Nya."

"…okay?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 16th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Tatiana finished explaining things as far as Ganauche knew it to be for her, and Sonya absently felt her right eye start to twitch as the sisters ended up staring at each other on her bed.

She then shut her eyes, before her Flames escaped her grip on them, and worked on breathing evenly while the news sank in.

Renato had warned her… not that it seemed to make much of a dent. Admittedly, if she had believed the news her reaction would probably be another thing entirely…

The denial of an option she had gotten used to and liked was starting to slowly piss her off as expected, heaped on top of her awareness of exactly how hard it would be for the hitman to sneak on back and visit them without anyone catching him at it. What didn't help was how long it had been since they had an hour to waste at a café together bickering about nothing particularly important.

Which was now a rather nasty, cloying want of hers that just made her mood worse the more it looped between wanting to have a damn cup of Russian tea while snipping at Renato and the fact the man had basically 'cut ties' with her and the brat for at least a year or two.

All because some fucking assholes decided they wanted to press their luck.

Right now, she felt just a whole lot of building resentment. Of the situation, Renato's shitty assed timing, of being if not 'forced' then 'implied' to have to lie to anyone that thought they knew of the situation. Which included her family in that.

Typical of her reactions, especially given… given how Crina picked to go… and then a dislike of lying to those she knew were or could be important. Just to make it all the shittier, apparently.

"…I'm sorry, Nya."

"It's… while it's not fine it's at least not something you should feel like saying that about, Tats." She refuted a little flatly, but frankly she didn't feel up to giving more effort than that just yet. "The… I… I told him to stop putting it off…"

The nurse shifted to lay out, rocking her a little as she remained seated, but the older woman didn't
leave her to her own thoughts. "You knew about…?"

"He's been kind of ducking shit like that since last year, getting into the Iron Curtain for the brat's visit last summer was his idea of a vacation." Sonya informed her, still with as little emotion in her tone as she could manage as the information finally freed a few niggling worries she had been striving to not pay much attention to. "And before that it was some other shitty group. He, and I, were perfectly aware it was a good likelihood they'd get lucky... just... not this lucky."

There were a lot of similarities between Renato and what she recalled about Reborn, from the expression of Flames to knowing Shamal to the stupid shapeshifting lizard to curled sideburns. She might not be able to definitively say Reborn and Renato was the same person until he showed back up with a different name and still knew everything about her, but it was really fucking likely.

If... if something happened to Renato he didn't plan for or hadn't taken into account when he was completely cut off from anything remotely like help... and someone else with a few similar characteristics just happened to pick up Leon the half-Mist chameleon then wonder how the hell such a thing existed... it wouldn't be a stretch to think that same someone would hunt down the creator for future 'concerns or questions'.

There was a theory that everyone had a doppelganger somewhere in the world, and sometimes there were people that could look just like another without any genetic or otherwise explanations. She couldn't rule that out, however unlikely it might be to have all the same skills and life experiences down to the preference for handguns and Inverted Sun Flames in two that might just look similar to that degree.

...which meant there was a small possibility she took a few coincidences and thought the wrong Sun was the younger World's Greatest Hitman. Yes, Renato was the strongest Sun Flame user she ever met... but just because she hadn't met a stronger one didn't mean the one she had met was the most powerful Sun in the world.

She, after a moment to absorb that though, racked her mind for what had made her positive Renato was Reborn some few years ago. Shamal wasn't necessarily a solid mark in favor for the assumption, obviously while Sonya really couldn't recall much about the...

...was it a show or a book?

Wait, no. A cartoon... right?

...why the hell had she picked to use a cartoon as the 'guideline' in her current lifetime?

Some of it had relevance, obviously as it predicted the base ability and what they tended to be called and used for. That part she couldn't discount, however more it really was in person than through a second-hand medium. Cartoons, on the other hand, took liberties with realistic human limits for the sake of comedy or drama. Which then put into question how much had been exaggerated or twisted for the consumption of a younger 'boy' audience, and how the hell she was supposed to figure that out twenty years removed and an entire 'whatever' away.

Raking a hand through her now shoulder-length hair in some distress, Sonya strove in vain to recall more detail about something she had been pretty sure was the case, so she hadn't bothered to try to keep said details in mind. Especially as the asshole could read those thoughts.

A cold wet nose nudged her calf, as Alek picked up on her growing frustrations and pawed gently at her until he decided to jump into her lap for the better vantage point. Her puppy whined in frustrated confusion himself, earning him some halfhearted pats from her sister, as he picked up on the general
mood and lost interest in pouncing around the top of the bed he had never been allowed up on before.

She was pretty sure the stupid assed story she knew should happen in the future didn't even focus on the Arcobaleno themselves. Which then raised the question if the 'break the curse' thing she sort of vaguely recalled was part of the end of Vongola Decimo's early pre-mafia days would happen at all.

Was it just a flight of fancy embellishment to make a 'happy ending' using the parts available, or would it really happen?

She didn't know how the story her life turned out to be part of managed to get into another if somewhat more futuristic lifetime, nor could she say with any confidence how accurate it all was. If the events would all hold utterly true down to the last detail or if it would only have a passing acquaintance with what would happen. Several years beyond this point, and probably well after she had any remotely solid expectations or awareness for them.

…or if there was any real way to be sure of the events she didn't even remember that should happen at this point twenty-thirty years from their point in this timeline. They hadn't had shit to do with her, until the end where the man she thought of as an older brother entered the picture.

There was also the worry it would entirely come to be as she thought she recalled as long as she didn't unintentionally fuck over whomever was involved nice and early. Which was not something she could even remotely hope to do anything with, because she didn't fucking recall any other names at this point aside the few she had thought important a decade ago.

Sonya had spent the last few years not thinking this shit through, half due to not being all that sure her mind was her own at all times and partially because she just couldn't be absolutely sure of any of the details this far into her own life. This far from anything she still recalled from her last lifetime, little could be done about anything she didn't know the background details about.

Panicking about it now was not only utterly useless, but pointless. Either she recalled correctly and thus her worries were baseless or she hadn't, and she still had to just suck it up and deal. It'd happen if it'd happen, all she could do at this point was wait and try to amass a bit more information there was to be had until the situation resolved itself.

Hopefully Fong could say if any of the Wo Hop To women had found her something yet. She held the suspicion she had gotten what she could from Pierre-Antoine Carpentier's remaining things, although that would not stop her from trying more in the meantime.

Once she dug it out of the documents Bjørn had temporary possession of right now.

…and the moment she could be utterly sure of the people moving around her home, and those that needed them had their own. Given the rarity of the information, and the number of possible people that would be very interested in it and her interests as well in some number of years… she'd like to err on the side of caution.

"Are you okay, Nya?" Tatiana eventually asked, not unkindly but still with a bit of wariness the longer Sonya wouldn't open her eyes. "Not that I expect you would be but… I could take over teaching Fiorella today if you'd want a bit of time to yourself."

"I'd… appreciate it." She responded slowly, lifting a hand and using it to check to see if her eye coloring had shifted without her permission. "I need… well, would like to, warn the brat…"

She already had and knew for a fact what he was going to 'start' his things with. Pulling it out
without actually speaking to said brat after having this conversation with someone wouldn't help anyone's position, so they were apparently going to have to orchestrate a whole meeting between them so Usov and the Mirror Lady were 'sneakily' informed of what was going on.

The faint wash of lavender on her skin told her the eye coloring she had wasn't grey anymore. Not that it was very surprising given she had always been a contrary little shit, and this was no exception. Alek whined softly when she sank a few fingers into his puppy-soft fur and scratched him gently around his ruff.

There were a couple things she had implied, through inaction, that she would not mind doing for Renato. However much she wanted to resent it now, the thief just didn't feel like being that petty.

Well… she did but didn't want to lower herself to being that much of a bitch, so she wouldn't.

If she kept dwelling on it she'd just go around in yet more circles, so a different topic.

It wasn't just her that needed to 'act' right, Shamal had to as well. She should… well, they might as well go out and find that gelato store Tatiana had taken Galina to. It'd be 'removed', which would suggest to any of her other two Mists 'privacy', and maybe even whoever ran the stupid store could pick up on and spread around the fact Shamal's godfather was dead so no one would fucking bring it up later.

If the brat wasn't utterly crushed his godfather was 'dead' or gave a realistic crack at 'stubborn denial in spite of the obvious', a couple of people would start asking why. Mist insanity or not, all Mists were still human with human emotions. A 'strong' Mist like the brat probably should react a lot more than most would to the 'murder' of his godfather.

If Sonya wasn't utterly pissed off over the same fact, equally as many will become suspiciously confused by that 'strange' reaction. The Italians around here might not be, because they had some weird as fuck expectations and that could get by them without much question if she suggested a few things, but not those that actually knew her.

Keeping her reactions and retaliations standardized to certain levels of retribution was also something to do. Most of the fear she earned for her Flame type was drawn from uncertainty for her 'strange' behavior, so showcasing exactly what would happen if someone attempted the same bullshit to one of 'hers'… well, it was a plan of action and all that.

She and the brat had to work around that, and whatever their real reactions to Renato's forced hiatus from their lives was, without giving the wrong impression and ruining the 'clean slate' the hitman was pouring so much effort into getting.

…if it was him that was going to come back as Reborn and not some other random Italian Sun. It probably wasn't likely, but it was possible.

That little sliver of uncertainty was going to be painful until she knew for sure, and she'd only know when Reborn decided to pop up somewhere. Likely not straight in front of her, if they were going to pretend he had nothing to do with a 'totally different' Italian Mafioso hitman with Sun Flames then he shouldn't know her from any other blonde woman in any one place.

Fucking asshole.

It stood to reason, Renato had never been what one could call a 'low maintenance' contact. Even way back when, when they were only just introduced, if you didn't give him a certain level of attention he'd find a way to gain it himself.
Even if you didn't want him to.

*Especially* if you didn't want him to.

Sonya dropped the hand in front of her eyes and glanced over to her sister, Dying Will taint to her eye coloring or not, who mustered up a bitterly wry smile for her as she gently tugged the tip of Alek's fluffy tail or his oversized paws teasingly.

"I am really sorry, Nya. I thought tall, dark, and snarky was... well, a lot more cautious than this."

"There's no solid indication he's dead." She pointed out equally as bitterly, if for different reasons than she had. "I'm... I'm going to try to keep it in mind. At least until Cesare gets back, as he'd probably will 'get more information' than anyone else seems to feel like getting. And, if Renato gets back, I'm going to demand at least an explanation for this shit if not a trip to the spa on his damn kopeck to make up for it."

"Sounds like a plan." Tatiana agreed, equally as obviously not really giving it much credit as a possibility but with nothing else aside 'rumor' to go on not able to rule it out. "Should I send the brat up?"

"...I'll do it while you teach Fiorella tonight. I just... I'd like a moment if you don't mind, Tats."

Her sister immediately rolled off the bed, landing lightly on her toes. "Sure, Nya. If that's what you'd like. Just give a shout if you need anything. More liquor, a hug, whatever."

It wasn't remotely what she wanted, but it would fit the narrative Renato had expected her to put out once he pulled this shit. Frankly Sonya didn't want to be left with her own thoughts for company, because all it would do was make her thoughts chase themselves around in yet more circles and get to no resolution because there was not one to be had.

Alek was at least good for a distraction. Even as Tatiana let herself out of the room her puppy remained firmly in her lap more concerned with her rather sour disposition right now, muzzle set on her thigh and just curled up on top of her legs as he sat with her.

Within a week, the puppies had probably put on about four pounds of weight each. They hadn't quite doubled in size yet, it'd take another week for that, but they were at least giving it a good shot.

It just meant there was more of Alek to pet now, and the puppy was *entirely* alright with that and the distraction petting soft puppy fur gave. Slowing down, or getting distracted by her own worries, earned her insistent nudges of a muzzle under her hand to encourage more petting.

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(Wednesday the 17th of June, 1970. Superbi Manse, San Martino, Metropolitan City of Genoa, Italian Republic.)

A cautious finger poked her in the shoulder before a warm hand gripped it to give a gentle shake. "Nilda? Is... anything wrong?"

"I'm pretending to be sick." It'd be safer for everyone if Nilda did, then maybe she wouldn't make a complete fool over herself due to a friend of a... well, a friend.

Did Sonya count as a friend yet?
She had been weirdly permissive under Fiorella's attentions and more normally prickly under anyone else's. Likely because the real reason the Lady Vongola specifically cultivated her 'friendship' was due to originally saving her life, before the Mafia got dragged into things. Nilda had stopped pressing, and frankly had seemed to make an entirely bewildering amount of progress on that end… but she wasn't really sure yet.

Another hesitation on behalf of her husband, and Silvano took a careful seat on her side of the bed just to thoughtfully rub her back. With little slivers of Tranquility imparted in the movements to help her quell any issues her own Flames couldn't get a grip on due to her upset mental state. "Can I ask why?"

"Sonya's childhood friend is visiting her home, and I've come to the belated realization I might be a bit... 'pent up' when I couldn't stop eyeing him up." She hadn't quite known what the full issue with her political marriage would be until the wedding night, when he actually informed her of his preferences and she didn't match it through no fault of her own. It had been an incredibly awkward conversation, hands down the weirdest non-hostile incident in her life to date. "He's a little thin, obviously from serving time behind bars, but it just makes his muscles stand out more. Splitting four of their horrible potato-distilled liquor bottles with Sonya herself or not, he still split a bottle of wine with me and remained barely impeded in his faculties. Might've been why he didn't get up, when I had to leave... but... oh fuck."

She and Fiorella had tried true Russian 'vodka', privately as Sonya seemed to want them to start with, and at first it wasn't bad. A bit sharp, almost tasteless, and it didn't exactly smell of anything but the alcohol… and then two seconds after you took a swallow it'd hit you with the force of one of the Storm-Cloud's axes. That shit could take you out in two gulps without you knowing it, packed as much or more punch as neat whisky or gin could without the taste to help moderate how much you took, and they hadn't even put a dent in the strangely clear liquid before they had to stop.

Insidiously bland, sneaky vodka aside…

The first night hadn't been so bad, the vor had been undeniably drunk and aware of it to commit to more than just polite niceties. She was mostly sure she managed to hide her growing distraction over the Russian, Soft Flame Rain at least moderately well. Last night, on the other hand, had not gone well for her.

Either once he sobered up, or perhaps even when still sauced to near-uselessness, but Dmitriy was utterly aware she might've really liked to find some personal time with him or something very similar. He very much didn't seem to mind the thought either and was considerate enough to be aware she was married and probably wouldn't like a scandal to her name.

Her husband made a little encouraging hum into the silence as he kept on rubbing her back, which made absolutely nothing clear on what he thought of the situation. Perhaps he was refraining because he might not have much to say, or due to wanting more details before saying anything, or because of their 'situation' as straight woman married to a firmly gay man hearing about… another…

Nilda pulled her head up and glanced at Silvano's carefully expressionless features through the hanks of hair that escaped her ponytail. "Would you say no to a threesome, with me and another man?"

The Superbi Don blinked down at her slowly, not utterly taken aback but honestly confused at the query. "...Nilda?"

"Seriously. Russians have absolutely delighted in defying expectations, and as Sonya herself pointed out they're not 'mainly' religious so there might not be a whole lot of public opinion on such things as your 'interests'. Dmitriy, the man's... the vot's name, 'retook' the political position Sonya used to
have before moving that she covered for him first. A probably politically heavy hitter for the cover, with Rain Flames himself, a visiting Russian... if it doesn't work out then oh well we might not ever see him again, but if I can do it? He's got the reputation no one will ask or consider there might be a different reason to meet with him..."

"That's a bit of a stretch." He pointed out for her logically, and a little apologetically, if still actually warmly so she'd know she hadn't yet overstepped herself in this weird and slightly parallel relationship thing they had. "You're assuming a little too much about this, dear."

"Obviously. Come with me tonight and actually meet the man first, Silvano. Before you say no, or I start making plans. I might've long since tipped my hand and he knows I might very much like to jump him already, bringing you along might just get an interesting answer for us. Two years of prison might let him be flexible enough just to scratch an itch to take a risk."

Her husband considered it, and the skeptical twist to his features eventually fell away the more he thought.

"We can't do this little dance forever, Silvano. We're both human, not saints."

"That is not an argument to use for acquiring a 'third', dear."

"I'm not suggesting that. Once, to try it and decide then if we should find a discrete sort more local to help us or if I am a little too horny to think this through right. But if it can make you less disquieted with me, and build up a little something so it's not just perseverance you need for that heir you want, then why not? We both like men, why not use that?"

"It just seems a little like political suicide." Pointed out Silvano wryly, running an equally as frustrated hand through short cropped blond hair as he at least considered the proposition. "To go after the childhood friend of the Cloud on our southern border? Worse yet, something he might not be completely comfortable with? If he reacts... well, like most do outside my group or our clergy? My reputation might not last beyond the usual 'foreigners having opinions' discount if he so chooses."

"I, husband, am way too frustrated to let this idea go easily. We can have a perfectly straightforward marriage. You and I both deserve that much. It will probably be a little awkward in the beginning, yes, but we might be able to make this work with a bit more effort from both of us." To be honest, neither of them had tried that much just yet. Just getting used to things and finding where they worked together well had taken most of their attention so far aside their own respective responsibilities.

Then again, they both probably used the eve before taking their marriage vows to be sure to be in the best mood possible for the 'beginning' of their marriage. Nilda probably wasn't the only one a 'bit pent up' by now, Silvano was probably just a lot better than her in hiding the strain from just pure sexual frustration.

He blew out a long sigh, obviously turning things and influences he had to manage around his mind a few times, then glanced over and down to her with a wry smile. "I suppose I owe the man at least his own bottle of wine for entertaining you so well yesterday. I might as well try, if you believe so much that this may help us."

"Get your best vintage, Sonya described wine to him as 'sour and often gritty'. He also didn't look very impressed with the bottle we shared."

"How about a bottle of brandy instead?"
"...might work." She wrapped her arms around his waist, carefully because he never really seemed to want any comfort she might still give as a good friend instead of as a lover. "I'll be careful with you, Silvano. I promise, not just as your wife but as a friend. But if we continued this little stalemate, or even started looking outside of our marriage and happen to be too trusting the wrong friend?"

"I still get to say no if he's dog-ugly." Insisted the swordsman a tiny bit snobbishly, and with a slow smirk she would take to mean he was at least warming up to the idea. "Muscles or not, Nilda, which very well might help... but I have standards."

"Like I don't?"

"You're a girl. No." He drawled out with faux arrogance, huffing a short laugh in return for her jabbing fingers into his abdomen in revenge for the teasing. "Alright. Let us go see if this fancy of yours is worth something as fabulous as us, darling. And if he's remotely agreeable at all to even the suggestion."

"You can probably figure it out better than I can." Nilda gave him as his due before actually trying to extract herself from their bed, mostly because if this 'strange fancy' of hers would remotely work without causing them undue embarrassment it would probably be up to Silvano's skills in picking out those with a bit of a 'bent' to them. "But if you don't want in on that... I'm at least getting something if you don't mind."

He hummed an assent as she used his shoulder to help pull herself upright, then stood to help her up on sleep softened feet. "Very well. I do appreciate your care in this, Nilda. But if this is becoming a real distraction... perhaps not so much care next time?"

"I'll take it under advisement." Not likely, she got to the position she did as one of Ottavia's favored agents by being careful. However it was nice to know, as Silvano still had... trouble with her femininity, that he truly had no problems with her seeking attention outside their marriage.

Clauses and contracts were one thing, what happened in the moment could entirely be another.

Silvano huffed at her without any heat, easily reading the response as the refusal it was and respecting that, but actually gave her a warm hug before leaving her to change into daywear.

(oooo0000000)

(Wednesday the 17th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"...you feeling alright, Boss Lady?"

Sonya slide the first set of rings around the right joints of her right hand, but otherwise flatly ignored Peter's question. All ten rings, measured to fit either between her finger joins and the knuckles or plate the fine joint at the end of the fingers, flexing the entire hand to be sure there was still a full range of movement between setting the metal in place.

"It seems she feels disinclined to answer your inquiry."

"Yes, thank you Verde. I got the idea." He shot back at his lab partner, who was calculating a new glass-gem mix to use next a bit further into the now adequately illuminated garage, a bit annoyed but otherwise entirely unsurprised by the reactions the questions earned him.

Propagation didn't actually have a noise, as such. At best, if a Cloud was trying to make something a hell of a lot bigger in an instant, there would be a kind of soft hiss as air pressures equalized after
being forced out of place to make way. Not like Disintegration, which wasn't a sound in and of itself but the sand-like noise left behind as things crumbled into the empty areas the Flames left open.

Peter did have to glance around to be sure he wasn't in that dirt tunnel in Freetown but a continent away, recalling that strange noise. Admittedly, now he knew what had happened and that the woman hadn't turned her ability to make things in her way disappear onto him… well, there were just a few things that could stand out in one's mind regardless.

It had been a terrifying few moments, between their other cellmates facing a firing line and the Storm-Cloud responsible not feeling remotely helpful but making herself be anyways because he did something she hadn't known was possible. He didn't… like remembering it.

The small silver rings on Sonya's hands made no noise as the embedded chips of sea-green glass grew out of their original sizes, thankfully. She did it slowly this time, which prevented any noise from reaching him. Well, any noise related to the use of her Flames.

What was left behind was not quite what Peter had intended.

Obviously being very cautious of the gem-glass mix, the last they had of her spinal-Cloud batch, three of them cracked anyways. Even ignoring those gaps, the prototype for a gauntlet idea fell apart as the thief failed to control the variables of what she Propagated.

"A no-go for the design then?"

"From the feel of it," their boss admitted after a few minor adjustments made half of the glass scales fall off her hand, "I've made the glass too large to be held in place by your steel. They're breaking along at the rings, but not cracked the metal itself. I believe the glove idea might be best, although reinforcing rings are a design that is needed when accounting for the forces in play and how fragile the bones of the hand are… I actually don't need them for that. It's been a few… months, since I figured out just not wanting to be injured would avoid that."

Curious, Peter picked up one of the slowly shrinking plates and turned them around to see the small lip of glass with a hole bored through it had in fact cracked apart under expanding pressures. "...I'm not sure how to get around that cracking problem if we used this idea, so perhaps we should just scrap it. I... ah... am grateful you tested this design anyways."

"Verde, while I would not mind the ability to use my Storm Flames through these that should not be your priority." Sonya offered after a silent moment of contemplation, which was another drawback he hadn't planned on when trying to figure out how to translate a 'steel gauntlet' into something she wouldn't find more troublesome than useful. "Peter... the idea is interesting, but the glass doesn't have to be of any explicit size. Additionally, while affixing them in place while they grow out is something I would appreciate... as long as they are in place you might be able to use the process of Propagation to interlock them in some way."

"Or..." Posed the Lightning as he checked his current formula against his old college notes, "you could utilize more of the spider-string to secure the metal to the glass. Jewel dotted silk gloves will be a very odd feature, noticeable if only because of it's strange adornment, unlike a set of rings with the scales inlaid you can slide under any pair of gloves."

"Depending on the silk's tensile strength under secondhand Flame effects, that might have made this test a bit more than just merely interesting." Pointed out the Sun, hunching his shoulders a bit sheepishly under the raised eyebrow of the Storm-Cloud. "It might've. You said it withstood your strength before... if the silk would not give when either the steel or glass needed more room... then this might not be just a side-project to the main one."
"We can test out both, I suppose. Once Anna has cloth to be utilized for anything. The joints closest to the fingertips," Verde chipped in 'distal interphalangeal joints' because he was pedantic like that to give a name to something no one else would care to know and ignored the look Sonya shot him for it, "do not actually move that much. Some range of movement is appreciated, but if that complicates things more I can learn to do without for now."

"Are you expecting an incident wherein the glass armor is required sometime in the near future?" Inquired the Frenchman a bit bluntly, turning away from the work desk the notes on the Flame gem matching efforts and the chemical breakdowns of the likely culprits that allowed for it. "You had not appeared to desire haste before yesterday."

"...nothing is substantiated just yet."

"Is it coming here?"

"Would you prefer that?" She countered lightly, a trap in her words given the utterly hostile look she was pinning on the Lightning for his curiosity.

"No. I am not the type to appreciate unintentional or unscheduled field tests." Verde shot back shortly, seemingly missing the surge of ill-humor he was suddenly the target of. "I inquired to know if we should make our abilities and limits known to Adrik explicitly for defensive purposes."

Sonya studied him closely for a second, shrugging a shoulder somewhat dismissively as she bit back whatever ugly emotion caused her reaction and started stripping off the rings on her right hand. "Galina can and likely would be more effective for that until such a point she's overpowered. If Adrik doesn't already know everything you can do, I'd actually be surprised. Until such time either inquires if you would be willing to help them with something, assume your involvement will not be missed if you abstain."

Peter accepted the handful of metal loops from her as she pulled them off, and the slowly shrinking or cracking scales that were used as temporary placeholders for whatever gem-glass-mix was finally decided upon. The queerly lukewarm metal seemed to have suffered no other damage aside the securing points for the plate-beads, bending the thinner points out of place and making it obvious where the weak points in the design was. "Can I ask what happened... or...?"

Would she bite his head off for asking?

Still apparently feeling contrary enough to defy any expectation of her, the thief merely shoved a hand through her hair and spend a few moments silent before responding slowly. "We're... somewhat, sure... Shamal's godfather was killed."

...well, the kid didn't seem to have been told then.

"The brat's been told a few times that he was dead, by those with questionable motives hoping to capitalize on aims they had a moment to try before being removed from his presence somewhat... bloodily, and is of the opinion he'll believe it when I can safely assure him it's true." Continued the blonde blandly, which meant his thoughts were entirely too obvious still. "But the fact we've now got three separate factions reporting or hinting at the same..."

Fidgeting with the somewhat spiked rings, the Sun hesitated a touch too long. It wasn't really his place however fond he was of the little mischievous brat that liked tailing her around the castle for the hell of it.

Verde spoke up for them in the second he had the opportunity, with his characteristic bluntness and
general indifference masking his ruthlessly scientific poking to be sure of all variables he was presented with. "There are those who targeted him for such aims? The younger, not the older."

"What part of 'mafia' did you happen to miss?" Sonya asked of him archly, turning on the scientist rather than her pet engineer who opened an outlet. "Yes, I can be 'nice'. Most of those I work with will avoid targeting children. That's an exception rather than the norm for most. Of course going for the brats is a valid tactic. Most, if not all, will do so if you do not guard them properly."

"It seems more like entrapment." Pointed out the man younger than him but older than her. "Not expressly a failure on behalf of any involved."

"It was." When neither of them seemed remotely satisfied with that short confirmation, it at first seemed as if the woman wouldn't clarify anyways but she then very obviously decided to do so when she continued. "Vongola's high profile enough that many can claim a need to speak with at least someone in their headquarters, which opens the opportunity for malicious mischief. Shamal, as a Mist, is asked and sometimes required to assist in those situations as he is nearly impossible to trap in a physical location. Better to use children other than impressionable young Skies who might hear something against Vongola, especially if they do not have other influences to be upset about it…"

"Aren't you upset about that?"

"…both Shamal, and Renato, found it unremarkable and more something to pay back the brat's few years there than anything else." She answered without really addressing the question, getting to her feet as apparently she was of the opinion this whole test and answer session was done with. "Peter, I was wondering if you could help Ruslana."

"Um… sure?" Peter allowed, trying to ignore the annoyed Lightning facing a possible reduction in their experimentation time before the next mix was decided upon. "With what?"

"We know, through the Mist ranks, none of the four maids we picked up so far are working for more than just me." Explained Sonya with little tone to her, but something way too sharp in her eyes still. "However, out of all of us currently present right now, the only other one that could pass as a 'people person' is you or Cesare. And Cesare has other things to occupy him."

He tried, really hard, not to let his shoulders hunch up with ill ease. Apparently, given the arched eyebrow from her and the shift of laser-like attention from the other man present, he horribly failed in that.

Why was Verde picking things up faster than him?

He learned of this lifestyle not that long ago, where Peter got his rude introduction with a guide that refused to be obstructed by either his incomprehension or those that wished them both ill.

"Peter." The Storm-Cloud interrupted his thoughts with little patience. "If you don't feel like it-"

"I can..." Possibly. He had gotten more and more comfortable talking to others as a teacher… as long as there was a very obvious reason to listen to him and structure to what he had to say.

With Andrei and Ch-

Or not. No. A few bar rounds with a now dead pedophile wasn't really something to take cues from.

"You have the right to say no." Sonya pointed out for him when the silence got a bit longer than polite, not gently but giving the option was still generous of her in a way. "I'll ask Larion and Maximillian instead."
Which would defeat the purpose of finding something not-Russian to put her new hires at ease, as both the Rain boy and their accountant were as Russian as she was herself.

…Peter just couldn’t bring himself to offer the kind of help she was inquiring after. He had already unknowingly volunteered himself, but doing it knowingly was apparently just a little too much for him right now.

"Alright." Accepted the woman paying him a wage and supplying not only a roof over his head but at least three square meals a day. "Never mind that for now."

"Boss Lady."

"Stop calling me that. Tatiana is alive, it's her title."

"You're still the boss, and a lady." Countered the Sun dryly, striving to ignore his knees threatening to knock together in relief that she wasn't going to expect him to help with new and possibly judgmental hires even if he had said so without hearing the details. "It still applies. Besides, I'm used to thinking of you as 'Boss Lady'. More than 'Sonya' or 'Bazanova'."

"Call me 'hey you bitch' for all I fucking care." Sonya refuted a touch nastily, irritated but not directly at him if he was any judge of her intentions.

…which he was apparently very bad at, so Peter dithered for a second before offering up another suggestion. "How about what Cesare calls you?"

"…I'd rather you didn't."

Well, he had just unintentionally depressed his boss. Go him.

It was a derivative of the title… ah. Cesare might be the one to use it right now, but it was drawn from the same probably dead man she had just spoken of who was a friend of the chef. According to rumor anyways, because he had yet to actually speak to the Mafioso more than just if he could make some of the rare few things he had liked from his overly long stay in Africa.

"How about just 'boss'?" Tried the Sun next, taking the short glance and the woman turning on a heel to leave the garage as a 'maybe'.

"Perhaps not." Verde volunteered for him dryly, turning back to his calculations to find them a potassium-based glass-mix formula that might result in a stronger gem-glass for their uses. "What is so wrong with her name?"

"…she doesn't actually use her surname." He offered after a moment of serious thought and a little introspection. "Occasionally when she can’t get away with omitting it, yes. Of course she’ll respond to it, maybe a second later than most others would. However, she does the same with 'Sonya'. Only 'Nya' gains instant recognition, and Shamal calling her mamma, but I do not feel being that familiar with her is proper. It's almost like how I occasionally need a second to respond to 'Peter', or how Hawk can occasionally ignore anyone calling his name… more like how well you respond to 'Verde' when it isn't your name."

"Does being chosen by oneself or another change the validity of such handles?" Shot back the scientist without so much as glancing up. "I assure you, I was not titled 'Verde' willingly. Titling myself 'green' would have made little sense even in America. Does that mean it is more suitable to you than your own designation?"

"That wasn't the logic I was using." Pointed out the Sun with a measure of exasperation, close
association having taught him a bit on how to interact with the Lightning with minimum issues. "I am merely pointing out that as she seems lukewarm over her surname, picked for herself or not, and almost equally neutral to her first which I do not feel is proper to use myself... I feel using another is more comfortable for me. A title, which she is for me personally. She is literally our boss, the paymaster, the one supplying us both with funds and living expenses to do work she either doesn't wish to do or can't do herself."

Verde cast him a blandly unamused glance, striking through the formula he had been working on with a few impatient movements before flipping to a clean page to try again on. "If you insist. However, if I may be so impertinent, perhaps that is why she is so unused to her own names. Others persistently failing to utilize them instead of unwanted labels of another's."

Peter threaded a few fingers through the strands of hair on the back of his neck, wondering about that.

(Thursday the 18th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Where the hell have you been?" Sonya Bazanova, Russian 'dragon' and the mistress of the castle asked of her recent stayover guest as Marinella escorted him back into the dining hall.

"Well... here or there. But, look who I picked up on the streets coming back here." Gesturing his tattooed hand to another Asian, this one not elderly or female, the man introduced to the maids as simply Dmitriy apparently side stepped any interest in his previous location. "He said he's invited."

"Fuck, Fong, did you take the scenic route?" The blonde asked a bit archly, ignoring her as she carefully skirted the castle residents and sought refuge in the kitchens. Interestingly, her elder sister greeted the man after swallowing her latest bite of breakfast with a 'hi, tasty muscles'.

Which... yes. Most of the men that were either visiting or otherwise were very fit. She kind of really appreciated it, because there was always something to admire in between chores.

Of course, she very nearly got bowled over by the young Chinese girl who lived here while doing so. Apparently the younger sibling to the newly arrived man given her excited exclamation of 'big brother', and utterly ecstatic to see him enough to give a good attempt to knock him off his feet despite whatever might be in her way.

Marinella finally managed to slide into the kitchen without further incidents, only to be tasked to drying the dishes her best friend was washing by the lady in charge of the kitchens when Cesare was out for his own business.

"Well?" Inquired Rebecca quietly, in hopes of not drawing Mrs. Tolmacyova into the conversation, handing her a plate of one of the early eaters she was scrubbing her way through.

"...wow." She managed after a moment. "Even taller than the last one. Miss Mingxia apparently has an older brother."

"I heard that part just fine, thank you." Her best friend pointedly informed her, sinking both hands back into the lukewarm dishwater in search of the silverware hidden under a layer of suds. "Good for her. I kind of thought, with 'Master' Yaozu being the one minding her..."
"...it might still be the case." Marinella pointed out in return, running the last bowl under a basin of cleaner water to rinse off whatever soap was trying to cling to it. "Unless you would like to ask her, all we can do is guess where her parents are."

The darker haired girl she called a best friend immediately shook her head in refusal. "I've already embarrassed myself in front of Lady Bazanova. I'm not doing anything remotely like that again."

She snorted. "Telling her she had guests, and not giving any names they supplied, was kind of stupid of you."

"You're a bitch."

"I love you too." She countered brightly.

Mrs. Tolmachyova interrupted before they could change subjects from the other side of the kitchen. "Girls, I believe you can start in on the pots and pans... also, you are aware most of them out there can clearly hear you two?"

Surprised, her best friend very nearly dropped a soap-slick knife over her foot she had been about to hand over to be rinsed and dried. The same intimidating woman that they worked for snatched it out of the air before it could harm the younger maid, placing it on her stacked dishes without a word and simply setting them on the counter next to the sink herself.

Rebecca went beet red, and somewhat stiffly slid the new stack of dishes into her dishwater.

Marinella only turned around when someone tugged on her skirt and tried for a smile while accepting young Shamal's breakfast dishes. "Thank you..."

"We don't really care."

"...about what?"

"If you gossip." The young boy pointed out for her with a tiny smirk. "As long as you put some effort into ensuring it's true gossip and not just baseless rumors."

"And you don't allow it to distract you from your duties." Insisted the greenette across the room, scraping the worse of the mess left in her pans to make cleaning them a bit easier on the two of them. "I suppose it makes some sense in a way, Sonya insisted we were unusual and the best way to make ourselves unremarkable instead was to allow it to go on... at least until a few people realize we really aren't all that interesting."

"Well... how else is anyone going to know what's going on up here?" Pointed out the child sensibly, wandering over to that side of the kitchen with his puppy gamely following along in hopes of some scraps from those pans. "So long as it's true it's not really hurting anything, there's not a lot of point to try to squash something that's going to happen anyways."

"I suppose that is how your godmother got around to deciding 'only if it's true' for our policy about gossiping at work?" Ruslana Tolmachyova inquired with a wry smile of her own, allowing the young puppy pointedly staring up at her a few bits of fried tomato slices that had gotten stuck to the pan in her hands. "Objectifying some of the younger men for their looks doesn't really sound very polite to me..."

Oof. Marinella put the dishes in her hands on the other side of her best friend, glancing at her face to see if Rebecca had managed to overcome her embarrassment yet or not. "We're supposed to scrub the second-floor bedrooms down today..."
The younger woman then managed to overcome her blushing issue, only to not stop at her normal complexion and go a bit grey under her tan.

"She's *not* that scary."

"*Keep telling yourself that.*" Rebecca muttered softly, shifting her shoulders uneasily. "*I don't know why she scares me, just that she does.*"

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 18th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Given the sudden scowl on her lips, Sonya wasn't happy to hear she terrified her own staff. Refocusing on him and his very happy sister, the thief took one glance at Mingxia's face before continuing on. "I'll tell Hawk he's on his own for today, *then.*"

"Oh... um, thank you." Fong's little sister accepted softly, still refusing to let go of her visiting brother.

As it didn't seem Mingxia wished to let go, or move locations for right now, he picked to start with something less personal than her exam results while in a 'public' area like this. "Sonya... a castle?"

"*Do you see how many idiots have picked to follow after me like a bunch of damn...*" The woman glanced down, at the white and grey speckled furred puppy sitting at her ankle. "...well, ducklings? Where else was I going to shove all these idiots?"

...fair enough. He rubbed the young Rain's back as she just unwound some against him and cast around for another relatively innocent topic. "Where is Master Yaozu, if I may inquire?"

"He eats early, so either in his rooms meditating or bothering Maximillian again in the back office." Sonya informed him, bending down to scoop up her young animal companion before moving on to what her own aims would be today.

"*Master Yaozu is meditating.*" Offered his little sister quietly, reluctantly letting him go so they could move in that direction. "*His room is next to mine, big brother.*"

Canting his head to the side as he followed her back down the hallway one vor Dmitriy showed him through, Fong figured out there was some Mist-mischief afoot. It took only another second of actual attention paid to what he could hear to understand it was translational in nature.

He didn't speak Italian, and apparently while in Sonya's home castle he could understand it perfectly fine.

Interesting.

Mingxia led him up two whole floors, and while he did pause at the library that took up a good portion of the third floor it didn't delay them for long as it was prompted by mere curiosity. His little sister's room was a back-hall affair, with the rest of the 'staff' Sonya was supporting for being useful to her. She named each and gave what warnings there would be for them or those they housed.

The only warning was for the Mirror Lady's rooms, and Fong had met her beloved pet before to entirely understand and respect that 'do not open her bedroom door' mandate.

Yaozu's curt 'enter' had all three of them in a very spacious bedroom in short order, occupied by a
bed tucked away in a corner and little else aside a low dresser and the man they had come to visit himself. Fong, a bit impatient to help reassure the young Rain, revealed the file he had hidden up his sleeves. "I believe, little sister, that this is yours."

She squeaked in surprise, rushing back over to his side to receive her results. "Oh no, oh no. I failed geography, didn't I?"

She had, in fact, not failed geography. It might not be the best grade, but he felt it was understandable for her very first year of formal schooling. Fong allowed her the file and space to see for herself, turning to the elderly man observing them. "Master… it is good to see you again."

…it would take a moment to be used to that automatic translation effect. The Mist Flames were drawing the understanding of his words from him, and it might be entirely possible to utilize such in very interesting and possibly insulting ways while still being 'polite'.

Yaozu eyed him, not nearly as hostile as he might've done not too long ago but with a measure of exasperation. "My student… I have a few questions while Mingxia is otherwise distracted."

That was very different. "How can I assist?"

Instead of immediately posing any such questions, the elderly man reseated himself in the middle of his bedroom floor and gestured to a space across from him. A few more seconds were spent obviously ordering his thoughts before sharp black eyes affixed to his own. "Ignoring for a moment the Triads were where you had to go in order to find the help you and your sister needed, what do you think would have helped you more at that time to prevent your joining?"

"There were many factors, master." Fong held up a hand before he could delve deeper into the questions he very obviously had. "Not everything was due to my Flames. At the time, an actual job without the risk of bodily harm or harassment was a significant contributing factor. Utilizing the skills I trained for would have assisted me the most. Supporting Ming was actually the driving motivation, my Flames while unruly were not harming those I wished well. Aside those points, it would not be the situation I encountered myself."

Slightly annoyed, more by himself than his answer, Yaozu contemplated his own thoughts until the young girl belatedly seated herself with relief in every movement she made.

"Very well. Then, if I may ask, how do I show my students I am aware of Dying Will Flame issues without attracting the 'Vindice' for being too blatant about it? I do not wish to repeat a mistake I now know of."

Fong blinked slowly. "…to be honest, master… I do not know."
Chapter 17

(Friday the 19th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

A crack of thunder rumbled distantly overhead, and Sonya considered the water hammering her second-floor windows with a bit of annoyance before returning to not reading her newly translated textbook. With a sigh, she lowered the tome and instead directed her attention to the ceiling overhead as those that decided to lay down with her kept on sleeping.

She supposed they had been lucky not to be rained on the last couple weeks, but it didn't mean the expected rainfall avoided annoying the shit out of her. Thankfully most of the construction was getting to or near the point of being finished. Floorboards, carpets, tiles, and cabinets were being installed today instead of the last of the sliding that needed to be nailed in place.

Everyone on the second floor was still packing up, with a little help from the maids, while the rest of her household found themselves indoor chores to occupy themselves with. That was, everyone except Verde and Shamal from the second floor were moving out. The scientist would move out a few more weeks from now because his home wouldn't be done around the same time as everyone else's', those underground labs required a significant amount of concrete and it had to dry out before the next level could be built on top.

Marco whimpered when the next roll of thunder sounded and while she didn't hear what Alek's response was, she did feel it when the puppies decided curling up under her thighs was the best idea. Two fuzzy, warm bodies wedged themselves even closer to her than they had picked to do before the heavens decided to dump a significant amount of water down on her castle and the village. The cuffs of her shorts weren't really protecting the back of her thighs from puppy fur very well.

Which, added to the fact that after breakfast Shamal decided she made for a good mattress for a post-meal nap, meant the thief was a little penned in.

She kind of minded, a little bit. Not nearly enough to move anyone, and certainly not her brat given the slightly moody edge to the kid ever since a few others got around to hinting at what was going on with Renato for her to pass on, but next time she'd move the dogs before they got themselves nearly under her ass.

She hadn't thought there was enough space for them when she propped up her legs on the arm of this second-hand wicker couch affair but then again, a good portion of their bodies was still just fur.

"Ah… there you are." Fong announced brightly, seemingly on his way up from the ground floor to somewhere else. Marco thrust his fuzzy head between her thighs just to perk his ears up at the new voice, and the Storm came to a bemused halt as the puppy started wiggling to get free and get reassuring pets from the newest new person he had been introduced to.

Annoyed, she flexed her knees up just so that the puppy had an easier time of it. With a few rather rude paw placements the darker of the two dogs finally got free and leapt for the floor, only to almost do a complete flip as his momentum continued past what Marco expected. Rolling himself over, with a sudden crack of lightning to help with a dose of adrenaline, the tri-colored puppy decided face-planting into Fong's leg next was the best choice for whatever he wanted to do.

The Storm looked utterly taken aback at the puppy antics. "…Sonya?"
"They're scared of the thunder." Which should've been a bit self-explanatory, really.

Up until it started to rain pretty heavily, both puppies had been perfectly fine with playing some sort of tug-o-war game with a bit of knotted rope. That was now lying abandoned under the couch she was hemmed in on, because after the first discharge of electricity from the clouds both had decided to take refuge under her ass with a whole lot of haste.

"I see." Bending to scope up the shivering puppy pawing at him, the martial artist tucked the animal into the crook of his arm and finished walking over to her. "You have a very… charmingly expansive home."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" She asked in utter confusion, lightly smoothing a palm down Shamal's back so the kid could either wake up or remain asleep comfortably.

"I'm trying to find a diplomatic way to state I appreciate the unusual number of individuals you are housing that help flesh out a household my younger sister was then added to." Explained the man with a simple shrug, before seating himself neatly crossed-legged fashioned so Marco had more space to huddle within. "Even if this is far from our and your former home and resulted in something that cannot be comfortable for you."

"…you failed hideously."

"I have realized this, yes." Fong agreed passively, utterly unbothered as he calmed the puppy huddled in his lap down with a practiced hand. "However, I believe the point stands."

Sonya eyed him in confusion. "What point?"

"This is… larger than I expected from you." He repeated for her, taking a hand from Marco's back much to his disgruntlement to gesture to the rest of the second-floor landing/lounge affair right outside her bedroom. "There are a number of individual and groups here that I highly suspect actually bothers you greatly to have so near. In fact, given the construction efforts so prominent, I suspect a significant number were not intended to reside with you for any measure of time."

"It doesn't bother me that much." But the point that it did bother her somewhat still remained, even if the Triad member very considerately allowed that point to go unremarked upon.

"I… must confess… I am a little suspicious." Fong instead continued with rather politely, absently smoothing down Marco's disturbed ruff as the puppy miserably endured the summer morning thunderstorm with ill grace. "In hindsight, this seemed too easy."

She almost snapped something entirely insincere and flat at him for that but ended up considering his point even if she really didn't fucking want to.

Because, the reason she hadn't slipped in anything on Fong's end to uphold for the whole 'find a martial arts master to teach my brother' turning into 'supplying baby Rain sister a spot to get her schooling done elsewhere' was entirely due to not expecting to need a killer at hand. She had… Renato, and if something got to the point she wanted it gone but didn't want to do it herself she was semi-sure the hitman would've done it for some kind of reward.

Mingxia could support her own end of the original arrangement, not entirely on her own but eventually. Frankly, Sonya wasn't all that against long-term investments. Yaozu had been taken care of long before he decided to go along with it, and there had always been a sliver of a chance Cherep would just pass on the entire thing out of hand instead of at least try.

However, the fact the Storm picked up on a disparity between what they both gained from the
arrangement now was just him being practical. Depressingly.

Technically, with all those idiots padding along after her, she did kind of qualify for the head of some kind of criminal syndicate. She wasn't the only criminal in the castle, after all. Really, with what she seemingly ended up with, she should be a whole lot more pointed about getting more out of what was asked from her. In just about every situation, not just former promises.

Hoarding power for any future incident…

Fong spread his hands apart and held them up. "I know, and I realize, your position now is not the same as then… I suppose I ask, just to know if there-"

"Stop there." Sonya advised him sourly, now thoroughly disgruntled which being pinned in place had not caused. "I promised. Then. The fact that now I have more leverage does not invalidate it."

He considered that somehow pointedly. "Unusual of you."

"I'm pretty sure renegotiating things like that is considered rude." She pointed out for him. "At least when there's not significant outside interference to warrant a renegotiation."

"Hasn't stopped anyone yet."

"I generally pride myself on not being an asshole, thanks."

The martial artist snorted, returning his hands to the task of soothing the miserable puppy in his lap. "I really can't help but wait for the other shoe to drop. Nothing has ever gone this smoothly, not even my joining the Wo Hop To."

"Think maybe that says something about your past experiences?" Poked back the entirely unamused thief, earning herself merely a quirk of his mouth that might've been called a smirk in a different situation.

"If you insist on continuing to be the exception of the norm…" Fong continued on without addressing that, studying the young animal in his lap then the one under her thighs. "…then I suppose that is equally as expected. It is not as if you were conforming for expectations before."

"Surprise, I haven't changed. In the half a year since we saw one another last." Sonya drawled out sarcastically, and he raised his floppy sleeve to hide what she suspected was an actual smile. "Shocking, I know."

"Indeed. Most unexpected of you." Chastised the martial artist with a dose of humor, a faint edge of something in his posture easing into passiveness all of a sudden. "However… there is an actual reason I sought you out, aside the concerns actually seeing your home brought to mind."

"…ho?" Shamal suddenly pushing both tiny hands into the softer part of her stomach cut off anything else she might've said, and her godson blearily scowled moodily at the faintly surprised Storm. "Oof… Shamal?"

"Aren't you Miss Mingxia's brother?" Demanded the tetchy Mist, rather irritably. "Shouldn't you be visiting her?"

"Ming wasn't the only one I came to see, but you are correct. I am her elder brother." Allowed Fong rather patiently for how rude her brat was being, as Sonya adjusted things so her guts weren't being compacted against her spine anymore. "And indeed, it would be rather churlish of me to ignore my hostess and fail to express gratitude for the invitation that allowed me to do so."
Ignoring the fact her button down short sleeved shirt had left a pattern on one side of his face while he cuddled with her, the seven-year-old took advantage of her rearrangement to basically sit upright on top of her lower abs. "Okay, but I'm watching you."

Having stated his piece, Marco suddenly disappeared from the older man's lap to end up in the child's with a confused half-bark that roused Alek from his nap. The rainstorm finally discharged the last of the thunder seemingly five minutes ago so the puppy, while confused, wasn't entirely against being returned to his boy while her own tried to figure out what was going on from under her thighs. Valiantly striving to keep his amusement from his features, only to completely fail when he glanced at her likely completely nonplussed expression and crack a smirk, the man who had probably seen at least a decade and a half more life than her brat inclined his head graciously. "I expect nothing else from a dutiful young man of the household. Your diligence is commendable."

…Fong knew what her brat was pulling, enough to pass judgement on what it was for. Sonya wasn't entirely bothered enough to want to know, but she had the sneaking suspicion Renato planted it in Shamal's head if other random men she knew understood what was going on instantly. Huffing, and knocking the brat over by sharply sucking in her gut when he was adjusting for being bounced instead, she poked him in the crown of his head before he could squirm upright or away from her. "Well now… since you're done can we finish this conversation?"

Shamal rolled himself and his puppy over to wedge himself against her hip and the back of the wicker couch, aiming a completely innocent smirk up at her. "Of course, mamma."

Alek finally got out of the little makeshift den the same way his brother did, scrambling through her mostly bare thighs and basically wiggling with abundance until he could stand up exactly where the brat had been sitting before. He looked entirely confused at her aggravated sigh, and she finally let go of the first translated volume of the Flame lore books to finally free herself from the little trap she had been stuck in since breakfast. "Alright, butt over or get off."

Her puppy went for the ground in a tumble of pale fur, Shamal fell into the spot she had been previously reclined in and took his dog with him, and Fong helpfully scooted himself back a few inches to give them more room. "Frankly, I rather thought you would move sooner."

"What did I say about assumptions, Fong?" Sonya snapped half-heartedly, planting both feet on the wooden floorboards and stretching out her spine with the freedom.

"I merely meant the arrangement looked a bit overly warm." He defended, which was actually understandable given two were furred and the last was a brat of a boy half laying over her. He offered an open palm for Alek who, after two cautious sniffs, decided to amuse himself under the couch instead of pouring himself into his littermate's former spot.

"Sure you did, and I'm really a brunette."

"Truly?" Fong glanced at the top of her head curiously. "Your secret is safe with me, then."

He had the gall to pull a completely unbothered expression in the face of her next unamused glare.

(Saturday the 20th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
"Oh… Mirror Lady, are we early?" 

"No, Lady Vongola." The delightful young Mist waiting for them corrected in her almost bell-like voice, glancing downwards at the hand-mirror she always had with her. "An experiment has run overly long. Forgive the delay."

Nilda touched her shoulder, then slid out from behind her with an aim for the old childhood friend of Sonya's probably waiting for her in the next room. Fiorella wasn't sure what her bodyguard wanted with the other Rain, she only knew her husband was in on it and this was probably the 'last' time they had to convince him to go along with it, so instead she turned back to young Miss Anna. "Show me?"

Instead of summoning another of her full-length mirrors, the young woman gestured back to the dining hall with a graceful hand. Even the Italian Rain had gotten distracted by said something, for that was where the man she had come to speak to was, watching the going-on outside with a fair number of those she knew to be the Flame-less in this castle.

The kitchen had two very large windows, as well as a glass door leading to the back courtyard. It provided a fair bit of view over the three wooden poles planted in the barren garden plot and the footwear those balanced upon them wore. Two young puppies needed to be lightly nudged away from bolting out the door the moment it was opened, which took a bit of delicate arrangement, before Fiorella could find her nominal and slightly tardy dance instructor.

Sonya, her delightful sister, the ever-efficient Miss Galina on the ground with a young man who shared young Miss Mingxia's red eye color and nationality to an almost familiar level, vor Dmitriy outright wind-milling his arms to stay on his heavily splintered high perch, and the elderly Master Yaozu. The last who was wielding a fairly massive looking maul, and even as they watched he struck a two-handed blow against the pole Sonya was perched on top of.

The seven in the garden plot weren't the only ones out there, Sonya's godchild was next to that mischievous other Mist that lived with his parents in the castle. They were speaking to poor Hawk against the other 'back wall' of the castle, or more probably badgering the man about one or another topic, as Peter the 'Scruffy' supplied his back as a writing surface for Verde to record a series of notations down upon.

"-both annoying and that's totally unfair." Tatiana was in the middle of informing her little sister when Fiorella opened the glass doors to join those outside, not as surefooted as someone specific balancing on the poles but not as wobbly as Dmitriy was doing. "Show something, woman. Uneasiness perhaps, your blank-face is unnerving me."

"Hush you." Her ballet instructor tossed back absently, critically eyeing the elderly man doing his best to break the wooden shaft she had only one foot planted upon and yet could stand there as if it was solid ground. "This isn't actually hard..."

"For you!" Snorted the black-market nurse, overcorrecting the moment she returned her attention to her balance and nearly bending in half to remain stable. "You do this kind of shit a lot. Activation does not help to cancel out momentum very well!"

"You've remained up here with us anyways, stop bitching."
"Because your old man is fucking sadistic!"

Master Yaozu glanced over at her, apparently mildly amused at the redhead's defense disparaging his self, and delicately placed the maul head first on the ground. "I believe I've found my answer."

"He's not mine." Sonya countered irritably as the wood under her finally started listing from the damage inflicted on it. It almost evaporated into a blinding flash of purple fire, dropping the thief to an awkward fall to the ground from at least two meters away. "He's Fong's."

Examining the dirt now on her palms, the young woman rose back to her full height and glanced at Fiorella and Nilda as her bodyguard joined her outside.

"Well... technically." Allowed the younger Chinese man allowed with a slow, easy smirk. "Although sifu is my former master... as of right now-"

"Stop there." Advised the elderly man shortly, tapping the weapon in his hands against the dirt between his sensible canvas shoes a few times.

"Do you need help, Tats?" Inquired the younger Russian sweetly, almost nastily so. "Or should I leave you to find your own way down?"

"Oh... fuck... everything." That said, the Sun very gingerly attempted to bend her knees and find a way off her pole. Pointedly without asking for any help.

"Fiorella... Mrs. Silvery-White." Continued the ash blonde with wicked amusement as she turned to her guests. "This is Fong, of the Wo Hop To Triads."

The Asian dressed in all red and with a braid longer than even Nilda's hair gave both newly arrived women a polite shallow bow when they looked to him. "Ladies."

"Fong, the brunette is Lady Vongola and the platinum blonde..."

Glancing at the bodyguard's pointedly interested expression, Sonya visibly thought about it. Both Dmitriy and Tatiana managed to find their way down after her before she found a way forward, the Russian vor by just taking the fall with bent knees like his hostess had and the nurse much more cautiously but still on her own by layering an arm over where her foot was until she could lower herself down the pole gently.

"...is Mrs. Silvery-White." Decided the Storm-Cloud after a few more moments of thought.

"Really?" Inquired the Rain flatly, entirely unimpressed, and with a crossed set of arms to ensure everyone knew it.

A hitch of her shoulder was her first answer. "I never said I was very imaginative."

"I bet you wouldn't do this shit in..." Nilda trailed off suddenly, suspiciously eyeing their hostess. "...in front of your mother."

"Yes, she will." Tatiana corrected for her helpfully before deciding it was the proper time to go over any scrapes or bruises everyone that participated in this strange experiment earned, so she was a bit distracted with a scuffed cheek on young Larion the Rain before turning to work around Verde's notations to heal a slightly jagged cut on the young man's arm. "Seriously. Nya just loves pressing boundaries these days."

"I do not..." Snapped the woman in question irritably, then actually considered it. "...right?"
"Lately? It's all been about how far you can push people." Waving a hand in the air over her shoulder, she finally got a swipe of a glowing yellow thumb over the mark on the rather disgruntled French Lightning before actually turning to take part in the conversation fully. "Admittedly, a whole lot of people started it and you're just finishing it... but that doesn't really change much."

Under an entirely unconvinced look, the older sister sighed heavily and gestured to Fiorella herself.

"Seriously. The entire thing with Vongola, however fucking rude they were being, and yet Lady Vongola's here for her dance lessons. Silently daring Tyr the Sword Emperor, or not so silently when he brought news to you for your own benefit, with the whole 'take the other side of the mountain' dismissal? You know the poor guy's going to do it, right? You didn't exactly leave him much leeway there to get what he wants without damaging his standing this far north of his 'usual' place, to what will be at least a strongly sympathetic neighbor while he's establishing things. There's Hawk, and while you didn't say a thing about your confrontation with him in the library... like, everyone knows you did it."

Finishing her checking on any remotely possible injury this... whatever had been, the redhead came full circle back to her still mildly puzzled little sister reflecting on her points.

"And then, if I really have to I will, may I point to your treatment of the villagers? You're just basically waiting for them to do something, good or bad, without actually putting in the effort to show them a few details and let them draw their own conclusions. Yeah, you started something with the whole rumor-thing, but that's piss poor compared to hand-on information and you know it. They haven't called the cops on the obvious 'Soviet influences' up here yet, try giving them the benefit of the doubt."

From her expression, Sonya was still rather unconvinced.

Fiorella lightly coughed politely to draw attention, even as she got somewhat nervous to supply some second-hand advice. "You could put forth some effort to become known to the other Famiglias you border at the same time you are seen by the locals? I... well, really should meet with a few of the others apparently. Especially as these groups are so far north we rarely have adequate time to get to know them beyond merely reputation..."

"We have more than enough parlors for you to make use of, Fiorella." Nilda gave as the Superbi's token protest, but the silver-haired Rain inclined her head for the wry expression she got back for it.

"I live with you right now, Nilda dear. That is more than enough access, and you still house my sons as well." Timoteo hadn't made any mention of the side effects of her leaving him in the now nearly daily letters, but her Tutor Lisa had made it perfectly clear what her situation would result in by those looking in from the outside. She did appreciate her husband going out of his way to ensure her decision was entirely on her own merit, but they did not live in a vacuum. "Sonya, would you mind -"

"No." The Storm-Cloud paused, turned her attention inward, and loosened her somewhat stiffened posture to rake a hand through her shoulder-length hair. "Not more than once."

"Once would be more than enough." She agreed easily, because it was an allowance beyond what a casual acquaintance would provide. "Now... do I get a pass today or...?"

Her temporary ballet instructor snorted. "Absolutely not. Old man Yaozu, did this answer your questions?"

His contemplation of the weapon in his hand ended with its evaporation into flairs of purple Flames, and the named elder turned to her with a short nod. "All the questions I knew to ask."
"I have more questions." Interjected the still handily distracted Lightning Verde pointedly, slapping the roll of papers his notations were recorded in closed and focusing his rather laser-like attention on the woman housing him rather than the very thin non-Russian Sun.

She very pointedly jerked a thumb to the still listening Triad member. "The most powerful Storm I've ever met, go wild."

There was an almost insulted sounding scoff. "Cease distracting me."

"Stop letting it happen, then."

Fong looked mildly more interested at the shift in topic, and not just politely waiting out the introductions to be finished for the discussion to move on to different things. Almost the same kind of shift in personality that happened when she became unavoidably introduced to entrants to her husband, except in the Chinese man’s case his ambivalence to her continued past the introductions. Somehow, it was incredibly less off putting in him than anyone else she had seen with the same behavior.

"Verde's also the most crazily-overpowered Lightning I've met so far, as well." Sonya explained for his benefit, turning sharply away from the gathered group of her Flame users to join the visiting Italians on the back-patio affair of her castle. "That all being said, he's still somewhat new. Don't break him."

"Another question." Almost demanded the Lightning in question, ignoring the attention both the Chinese Storm and Italian Rain gave him for having the distinction of 'the strongest' from a woman that once ran a Flame school. "Does your mandate for cultural comparisons stretch to include the Chinese, or are you not interested?"

"That... would be an interesting conversation." Allowed the red-eyed man thoughtfully, extracting one of the arms folded into his sleeves to gesture lightly between them. "I would not be opposed to such an exchange on the side."

"Aside a few volumes on children's fairytales, I've not found a whole lot on that subject." Clarified the thief blandly, making shooshing motions in Fiorella direction to get things at least somewhat back on track. "Do so if you wish."

She got a last glimpse of the strangely affronted look on the Frenchman's narrowly pointed features, and the start of the irritated glower he pinned on the utterly passive and calm Chinese man who merely shrugged in return for the attention. Well, the last she saw of the slowly breaking up group before the Storm-Cloud fuzzed and herded her back inside for her lessons.

"Sonya? What was Master Yaozu's question?" Fiorella posed just before the Mirror Lady plastered the walls with a reflective surface so she could see how a 'proper' position looked and repeat it in the comfort of her own rooms later.

"I'll only tell you if you demonstrate a grand plié and hold it." Her rather ruthless instructor demanded as a few other latecomers filed in for their own evening exercise using the mirror-wall Anna was supplying for her lessons.

…oh dear, her poor knees.

(Sunday the 21st of June, 1970. Oratory of the Disciplinary, Moneglia, Province of Genoa,
"Lady, um… Miss Bazanova?" It took a second of staring, but Sonya eventually realized that was one of her maids asking the question. "I… didn't realize you joined the church…"

"We're still trying to decide." Countered the blonde a little dispassionately, gesturing somewhat half-heartedly at Shamal dressed in his 'Sunday Best' at her side. "This just so happens to be the closest one to the castle."

"I thought the Church of the Holy Cross was the closest to the castle?" Inquired the maid in a demure little sundress a little delicately, somewhat out of sorts attempting to speak to her without the safety of boss-worker relationships needing to be kept up over all.

Or yet another that her mere presence scared the shit out of.

"It might be… if I could find the damn place."

"We got lost, then ended up here."

"Sure, mamma. We all believe you." To make things worse, the Mist nodded along a few times before opening his mouth yet again. "And this has nothing to do with the fact we circled around the block three times before you gave up and brought us to the closest 'church-like' building you could see."

She slapped the little asshole upside the head for that, lightly enough all he did was snicker at her as he patted down kinked brown hair.

The maid, which she recalled as the one with the least problems working for her so far for only being the quietest of the quartet of castle maids, finally let the wry little smirk she had been fighting surface on her face with little care. "I see. Miss Bazanova, would you like me to show you where it is after Mass?"

She eyed the girl, which wasn't really fair because there was barely a handful of years between them if at all but she seemed younger than her somehow, sourly. "It's going to be just around the block, isn't it?"

"Well, down the road a bit… then right around the block." She supplied oh so helpfully, with a decent attempt at a professionally helpful little smile.

Shamal blurted out a laugh, clapping a hand over his mouth to stifle them into mere snickers and overbalanced into her thigh trying to keep himself from braying like a little donkey. Sonya sighed heavily and tipped her head backwards and the early dawn sky overhead, reminding herself that just because she was a little grumpy at the early-morning bullshit it didn't mean she had any right to take that ill humor out on anyone.

Especially not one of her own employees.

Before she could decide on what to do, either accept and resign herself to being teased to the death for her abysmal sense of direction when given a physical address instead of landmarks or refuse and find it later on her own, someone else interjected.
"Felixa!" Called a moderately heavy-set woman with a modest red and white patterned smock-thing, rather energetically bustling through the early-morning crowd to them with little trouble. "Who have you found, dear? I don't think I recognize them…"

"Mother, this is Miss Bazanova. The Lady who now owns the cliff side castle." The maid apparently named 'Felixa' glanced back at her, accepting the nod as an encouragement to go ahead with the introductions. "Miss Bazanova, my mother Sveva Ricci. She runs a bakery in town."

Apparently putting two and two together to get seven and a half, mother of the maid looked a bit taken aback for all of a split second. Then the rather gentle smile somewhat startled the professional thief waiting out the pre-Mass gathering shit this church had going on its front steps as the two of them exchanged a rather reserved handshake. "Welcome to Italia, Miss Bazanova. And who is this strapping young-?"

"Mother, no! Oh..."

"...my godson, Shamal." Sonya answered slightly warily, eyeing the woman and her daughter a touch suspiciously. The brat didn't object to a hand being placed on the crown of his head, he seemed a little cautious of the newcomer too if less so for her off-shift maid.

'Gentle' hadn't been a reaction she ever earned, well yet anyways. Most were either highly annoyed by the whole fact she had a pair of breasts, irritated that they got referred to her in the first place, greedily speculative of what they could 'get' out of her, upset about this or that, or just downright in fear for their very lives.

"Oh dear, the godson." An almost, honestly sad pout was aimed at the Russian with equally sad brown eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was a while ago." Shamal answered a touch dismissively on his own behalf, wrapping both arms around her thigh as he slid off the staircase bannister he had sat upon for the height advantage to people-watch with her.

"Still." Huffed the rather matronly woman, the pout still lingering. "I apologize for bringing it up. I'll pray for them."

…the hell would that do?

Still a bit baffled, Sonya didn't quite get the opportunity to ask the question if someone was 'dead and in Christian Heaven, what use would praying for them do anyone'?

Sveva Ricci turned to her with a half-smile of mixed genuine sadness and apology on her slightly sun-beaten if somewhat youthful face. Well, 'youthful' for having a full-grown daughter would make her. "Where's the godfather, if I may be so bold?"

"...the investigation is still on-going." Sonya deferred instead of outright answer in any kind of confirmatory manner she was never probably going to be up to admitting to just any random person.

The tiny arms around her thigh tightened to a point where Shamal might marginally affect her circulation. Eventually, if given long enough. "He's not dead. He's just... missing."

"Sure, brat." She agreed tiredly, because it was entirely true and just as nonconforming and wouldn't result in a snotty-tantrum about technicalities in front of strangers. "He's missing."

Felixa had her hands planted over her mouth almost since her mother brought up the subject of Shamal's parentage, and the girl winced behind them before exchanging a rather mystifying look
with her parent. "I've rather botched this horribly…"

"I'm sorry mother, I would've told you had I known she'd be here with him."

"There was no real way for you to have known beforehand, the maids I've hired have only been just introduced to the fair handful of people living with me and there's a lot of them to learn before getting into the backgrounds of specific individuals." Sonya dismissed the whole topic with a slight shrug, pressing back against the stone balustrade she had been leaning against as the crowd slightly stirred in response to something. Hopefully the church opening its doors, so they could get a move on already. "And I would inform you if I minded to the point of upset, madam Ricci. As it is, hopefully we can now avoid slightly melancholic topics and move on to better ones."

Unfolding her arms, she checked her refurbished copy of a Septuagint bible still had that letter of introduction the Bishop of Reggio Calabria had sent on to introduce Shamal to a new 'permanent' pastor. Stripping the gilt and gems off the bible had done the bulk of the work disguising the obviously stolen item into just another book, and the new brown leather cover revealed nothing about how it once was a museum piece.

She wasn't sure if this church was the one she and the brat would attend until he no longer needed her or another adult to go with, but just having it at hand when it became required would just be the easier option than sticking it somewhere else she'd then lose track of. Besides which, at least this one actually looked like a church and didn't disguise itself as an alleyway shopfront instead.

…if she was right in her suspicions and they walked right on past the other one a few times.

A gentle press of fingers on her dress shirt covered forearm had the Storm-Cloud snapping her head up to the elder Ricci maybe a touch too rapidly given how quickly those fingers had been snatched back. "If you have a few moments after Mass, Miss Bazanova, I would be pleased to introduce you around. Beyond just my need to make up for repeatedly stumbling into sensitive topics, it cannot be easy for you to move countries to care for your godson in a different land."

Sonya eyed her closely, but it seemed the middle-aged civilian woman was honestly intent on her suggestion. "It really isn't your fault… but if you insist."

Getting a personalized introduction around the local community couldn't hurt, because her sister's words still somewhat nagged her and just because she had poured a stupid amount of effort, time, and money into this whole 'castle' idea. If the locals objected to her then that was their own problem, but it didn't have to be that way.

Besides, this way everyone would know not to bring up Shamal's parents before they had the opportunity to make the mistake themselves.

…and, if her more eclectic theories would be born out, the presence of so many Dying Will Flame users would encourage the 'popping' of new young users in the local area. If that phenomena would be born out without the whole 'Sky effect' remained to be seen, but Sonya had been the first in Zolotov territory without realizing there had ever been a local Sky in either Moscow or Saratov.

That Sky Dmitriy's group found only had a sliver of time to affect her, if he was now 'too old' and established to pull away from his public life. If he had a public life at all, then he was either too well known as an entertainer or a government official. Two things Sonya did not recall spending a whole lot of time in the presence of, if at all.

The only thing local at the time of her childhood when she popped with Flames was a runaway Cherep.
Her fellow Cloud had been physically behind her at the time too.

They grouped up in little pockets somehow and given the pattern back in Moscow she actually somewhat suspected it was a domino effect more than just random happenstance. The only other explanation was that the mafia had a heavy hand in how things spiraled out of control, and frankly given the scope of 'the whole world' Sonya actually somewhat doubted it.

Everyone was way too self-interested for that to be the rule across multiple countries, cultures, and methods of operation. Enough so that one of the more powerful Middle Eastern groups then got caught out trafficking in young Flame users to bolster their numbers, which likely meant their local pool had been reduced to absolutely nothing new.

"I'd actually really appreciate it, if you would." Sonya refocused on the bakery owner, pondering if the woman could be of more use to her and her stupidly ballooning household any time in the future. "We're a touch at a loss about if our usual ways of introducing ourselves to our neighbors would be viewed rude or not, and no one quite managed to drum up an answer before we started hiring. The option of inaction kind of snowballed from there."

Which was an utter lie, but an easy white one. Everyone had been a little more concerned with actually making the castle viable to live in, then with sorting out each other in a kind of pecking order, before any remote thought was given to the villagers they lived with. Mostly through Cesare's sole efforts, who was too self-confident in his skills to be uncertain even in the face of foreign criminal types, but as he had requested some emergency time off they had no public relations handler right now.

Aside the one rare visit by Fiorella and Nilda using the actual road, it probably looked from the outside that she and the rest of her group got little to no visitors aside the construction crews.

In the ultimate end she wouldn't have the time or effort to pour into civilian-side contacts, even if they were uncomfortably close ones. That didn't mean she had no use for the offer, because Zinaida had little to do now her honey bee hives were established and just doing their growing-thing.

She was in the planning stages for after harvesting the honey, which was getting together all the oak-wood barrels, brewer's yeast, spices, and other implements of the brew master's tools. The stable-building would be half-repurposed to store the kegs in the rafters and supply a clean room to brew in as well as section off a little space for the horses to reside, at least until a dedicated building was built for her mead-business if it took off.

If it would.

Brewers and bakers probably did know at least a little about each other's career, if only to know the difference between baking yeast and brewing yeast. Sonya was utterly lost beyond the point there were differences between such yeast cultures, but the two women would at least have something to talk about and hence they could keep up a connection easily.

"We'd be delighted to have you." Agreed baking maid-mom, a slightly twisted smile on her slightly worn features, before the two of them joined the moving mass of humanity obediently filing into the church.

Shamal didn't release her thigh for a bit longer of a moment. "…what am I going to do then?"

"Well, you could come along." Sonya offered, and without glancing down she knew full well the little Mist was not thrilled by that suggestion. "Or you could go back to the castle and walk the dogs."
"I'll walk the dogs." Brat immediately jumped on, following her as they slowly went up a short staircase to the church.

"…well, that depends." She drawled out a little sourly. "How often are you going to bring up the 'going around the block' incident in the near future?"

Her brat pondered it for a few seconds as the press of humanity finally thinned a little. "…but mamma, I love you."

"Uh huh."

"I do!"

"Still seriously contemplating dragging you along." Sonya informed him dryly while exasperatedly waiting out the whole bottleneck at the church doors, so they could have a little personal space instead of being crammed in elbow to elbow with random strangers.

Shamal took advantage of the pause, sliding his arms around her waist this time in an actual hug. "But mamma, I love you…"

"That doesn't mean I'm unaware of what you intend to do with that information." She pointed out blandly for his benefit, having only a little trouble keeping a straight face. "In fact, your lack of promise to keep it to yourself just encourages me to do a little preemptive revenge well ahead of anything you could do."

"Hmm… yeah, I can see that." Admitted the kid equally as blandly. "But mamma… I love you. And because I love you I want to share that love, with zio and zia and maybe Mister Hawk and Mister Verde. Do you think nonna would like to hear it too?"

"Get your butt in that church, brat." Cherep was never going to shut up about it once he heard…

(Monday the 22nd of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Like the last time Fong managed to catch up to Sonya in her home, she was yet again with the young dogs and her very suspicious godchild. Outside this time, taking all due advantage of the weather holding up in something hot and clear that resulted after the storm that chased his heels here blowing over. "Sonya, can I ask a few questions?"

"Is there any possible way I could stop you?" Inquired the thief a touch sarcastically, which admittedly he deserved for a somewhat inane question. She made a sharp clicking noise, which made the lighter of the two puppies immediately sit down and crane his neck to see her.

After a second Sonya reached out and petted the canine's ruff in reward, which was more than adequate in Alek's opinion by how rapidly he whipped his banner of a tail around in glee.

Returning to her spot on a stone bench he was rather certain had been back up on the patio before this morning, she then leaned back and gave him a pointed look with an arched eyebrow in silent question.

"I will not feel insulted if you chose not to answer." Offered the Storm fairly, taking the seat next to her as her canine eventually went back to investigating a rather fat bumblebee's progress across the
back courtyard. "However, I did not think you enjoyed the near house arrest you suffered for us."

"I don't."

"Then why are you doing the same here?"

Sonya tiredly rubbed her face with her right hand, glancing momentarily over her fingertips to where her child had gotten distracted from training his young canine companion and was instead playing a game of 'nip me before I can pet you'. "Because I'm firmly not Italian in an Italian country, Fong. How much do you want to bet on if there was plans for this place I've just majorly disrupted, that those that were planning on something are interested in seeing if there's a way 'around' me?"

"Very little… although, in truth, I did not take you for one to wait until a problem arises to deal with such."

"I'm not, but until things become 'established' I can't afford being too far away from here in case of something happening." She explained with exasperation, flicking a wrist at her own young dependent before gesturing behind them to where his resided catching up with her responsibilities. "It all depends on how much I want to risk, and frankly I don't feel like risking what I've got."

He pondered over her words as Shamal realized that both his mother figure and he was fully aware he was being delinquent in his training efforts. The young Mist went back to attempting to teach Marco to sit on command, sneaking an occasional suspicious glance at the two of them.

Young Alek trotted back to his master, his antics with the bee forgotten in favor of triumphantly bringing something rather muddy back in his jaws. Dirt also caked his slightly too large paws and some of his muzzle, but the animal seemed rather proud of himself.

Sonya accepted the object with a bit of bemusement, scraping the dirt off with an absent swipe of a thumb to reveal some kind of tan-white surface. "…he found an onion."

Fong leaned forward to see that the animal had indeed brought back food with him. "A rather interesting talent to have."

"I suppose… except I have an entire kitchen full of food."

"That might not always be the case."

"…point." Setting the onion to one side, she gave him a pointed look. "Now, why the hell are you bringing that up?"

He gestured to himself. "I am going to remain, at least for a few more days. If you chose to stay cautious, at least for the early days, then I cannot blame you… however. You only need to remain as close as you feel justified in risking. If you can return immediately, or trust those here to delay more than enough either to solve any issue or for your return, then there is a rather wide range of area you 'must' remain within."

Sonya turned away and thought about it, reaching down to pat the animal looking for praise for his find. "This is entirely so we can have another spar, isn't it?"

"…well, I would not say no to such." Fong defended himself, only to earn a snort. "Sifu Yaozu had also mentioned an interest in seeing how you fight as so many do indeed agree with the assumption that risking your irritation may not be the best way to stay healthy."

"I'll think about it." Picking up her young canine companion, she leaned back and placed the animal
on her thighs. "I am getting rather more bored than I'm comfortable with."

Alek was equally as disinterested in him as he had been before, although not as wary of his person now. Settling in, the canine yawned widely and snapped his dirty jaw shut before almost bedding down on the woman's lap.

Fong ran a couple ideas though his mind before settling on the more promising of them. "...I'm a little bored as well."

"And why, exactly, would I be remotely interested in that?"

"Well, it is the duties you gave Ming that resulted in my being so." He returned with good humor, especially as the Storm-Cloud rolled her eyes. "Additionally, you are the hostess here."

"Yeah? And I was pretty terminally bored playing hostage for you. Where's my due?"

"I would not be averse to negotiations, if only on my own behalf."

"I'm very sure you wouldn't be." Sonya shot back, along with the onion Alek brought her aimed roughly at his head without actually turning her head to aim.

He dodged the produce easily enough and turned to watch the vegetable roll off only long enough for Marco to notice it. Abandoning his boy, the puppy ran to snatch up the root-bulb. Which attracted Alek's attention to where his gift had gone, and the pale furred pup scrambled off her lap to give chase and retrieve his onion.

Shamal wandered back to the two of them, now that training the dogs would be more than just merely challenging, pocketing the remaining strips of dried meat that was being used to reward Marco for good behavior. He gave Fong a suspicious evil eye but turned to his mother figure and pretended utter ignorance to her raised eyebrow. "What's going on, mamma?"

"Fong wants a few broken bones." Deadpanned the Russian flatly, choosing to pretend the same outright ignorance to the exasperated look he gave her for that claim. "Can you go help Mingxia, so he no longer has a reason to be a nosy worry wart?"

"...depends. What's in it for me?" Wondered the Mist, smirking as he drew out the silence under her unbelieving flat stare.

"I won't ground you to your room?"

"Well." With a shrug, the child shot him a suspicious look. "There's a point."

"Since Fong mentioned it, we could get the Mirror Lady's help and visit the next town over to see if they've got a theater or something like it." She continued after another moment or two of thought. "Or I could go myself and see what kind of books they've got over there that we've not had a chance to go through."

Shamal blinked a few times. "Okay!"

Darting up the low staircase leading to the back patio of the castle, the young child skidded to a halt just a step from the back doors fitted with glass panels just to indicate wordlessly that he would be watching Fong's actions regardless of his leaving.

"Okay... what the hell is he doing?"
"What any young man of a family unit should." He wasn't sure if there was much difference between what a young male child was responsible for in his home land and what a European or Italian child of a household should do. "However, Sonya, you should not be only reactive in this situation you have found yourself in. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, more so when it comes to the preservation of the lifestyles and lives of those we both would prefer to be unmarked for as long as possible."

The first thing his words earned him was a frown, but not a hostile one. A confused one, and as that wasn't a dismissal out of hand or a tart request to keep his advice to himself Fong continued only a little warily.

"Inserting sifu into the local community is a respectable first step, he will hear much about what woes the locals have in defending themselves or their properties from both others that live here and those here with mischief in mind. However, if you merely wait for those with ill-intentions to pick and choose their time you will forever be on the defensive and merely reacting."

"...I don't feel particularly right going out and hunting my own trouble." She informed him, still not defensively or with any hostility but thoughtfully. Which was more than he expected, in truth. "For one, they might be aiming that mischief to someone else and can claim foul to someone I'd rather not be at odds with. For another... I have a reputation of being somewhat restrained. That part was entirely not worth the effort, but I do not want to lose it either."

"Patrolling your territory is seen as your right, well... at least back home." Pointed out the Storm thoughtfully, in hopes she might be able to think of a way to no pen herself in anymore. "If you never really claim an edge of territory as too far... then how would anyone be able to tell to claim your hunting outside of it?"

Sonya, still frowning, glanced out the back of her home to the mountain that loomed over the tiny village and the stretch of coast she had. "That's... not a particularly bad idea..."

Fong rarely had the opportunity to counsel Triad Heads he didn't work for, therefore wasn't entirely sure of the process. He had Zhōng's ear when it came to Flame-related troubles, but that relied on being in Hong Kong when the head of the Wo Hop To Triad had a question. For anything else his Mountain Master had more experienced advisors, although he was relatively sure 'advised a Cloud' would still be a rather unique claim to have.

"You do have the reputation of being restrained. It doesn't mean that cutting off your own toes to keep it is necessary. Nor that doing any one particular action will cause you to lose it."

"...huh." After a few moments, Sonya got up and gave a sharp whistle.

Alek immediately bolted back to her and a confused but happy to 'win' the tussle Marco came after with the contested onion in his jaws. The pale and dappled puppy nipped half-heartedly at the vegetable when the two came to a stop near her, but the thief put a stop to it by bending and lowering a demanding hand to the tri-colored dog.

She wasn't exactly pleased to receive the drool-covered and slightly muddy onion. "Alright you two, in. I don't think I'd trust either of you to stay out of the way of anything lethal. Fong, we'll have to go a bit up the mountain first... but I wouldn't mind trying to dent your head again if you're that bored."

"I look forward to the many ways you will fail." He returned pleasantly.
(Tuesday the 23rd of June, 1970. Varese, Lombardy, Italian Republic.)

In terms of criminality, Varese was a haven for those outside Italia needing in. Due to the high volume of traffic, the easy boarder within a stone's throw to Switzerland, and the proximity to Milan, Varese was usually the first stop any criminal made before deciding to go further into the country or find another to handle whatever they needed.

It wasn't always a good thing, they kept themselves well-informed this north of just about everything in Italia and south of Europe. More than a few bounty hunters lingered around the outskirts, just waiting.

It made one more hitman, a bit nameless right now or not, entirely unremarkable as there were more than enough either looking for a break using the foreign powers stopping in or seeking their own ways home. He didn't have a reputation yet, so while he couldn't exactly pass as a dumb-assed civilian to those more than a little wary… he could pass as a middling Mafioso just on time-eating business.

He had more than enough examples to draw from in order to be sure everyone that so much glanced at him sideways would draw the conclusion he wanted. Dismissing him out of hand.

The Sun allowed the little lizard the freedom to flirt about his fingers absently, which Leon needed to catch the returning Flame beetles full of wisps of other Flames in order to eat its fill. The fact simple-minded insects tended to keep the last noise they heard in mind while buzzing back to fill their imbedded natural imperative to ensure their eggs were incubated right merely help him a small bit.

He had already known he was being followed, those loose lips were just pathetic. Overly-confident idiot wasn't hunting him for anything other than 'just because he didn't pay dues', which he knew full well he didn't owe due to skirting claimed territory and having nothing to do with any syndicates established in the area.

Thankfully he wasn't being hunted for a name and reputation that should've burned with the remains of a few uppity gangs, but that wouldn't get the moron any leniency.

The hitman once named 'Renato Sinclair' raked the fingers of his off-hand through his rather unruly hair and vowed to get himself another damn hat the minute he could afford the expense. Leon nudged the palm of the hand cradling him, only to earn an admonishing roll around the gunslinger's fingers and be tucked up into his shirt cuffs.

He had to deal with the tail anyways, might as well find a spot to shoot the bastard now rather than later.

Baby lizard claws scratched at his inner wrist, apparently Leon wasn't as happy with the action of 'being put to bed' as he had been previously. Bringing up one arm as if checking the time let him the freedom of motion to gently shove the misbehaving creature back into the small pocket of slack untailored dress shirts allowed.

He wasn't going to let the damn thing die from something as stupid as a fall to a busy sidewalk, even if it insisted on the right. Snatching a particularly unwary Flame beetle getting too close to him, he reluctantly shoved it after the lizard to be sure hunger issues wasn't the root cause of the misbehavior.

Given the tiny crunching noises, he was pretty sure it was.

Now he was going to have fragments of beetle shell in his sleeves. Great.
Leon had better not try to leave him the legs again, or the lizard was never going to be fed in his clothing ever the fuck again.

Being not a usual haunt for him, or frankly ever as he never had much need to hit up these transitory spots between two countries, he wasn't much confident in his ability to pick out a quiet corner to deal with his tail. The first two he circled around in a long-winded manner revealed they had been already staked out and were under watch, and although he couldn't prove it the hitman was a little suspicious they would've helped the idiot dogging his steps instead of just watch.

Either way, not what he wanted.

Worse yet, this was stretching the façade of being on task for someone else. The more time he spent being 'lost' made it more and more likely his lack of contacting anyone would ring a bit falsely to the point even the braindead would become suspicious.

Unwilling to allow the press of urgency to rush him into a mistake, yet still aware there was only so long he'd keep under an alarming level of suspicion, he attempted to find an unmonitored nook to deal with his persistent tail.

"…I wouldn't suggest that one, mou." A voice suddenly interjected before he took a left-hand turn, the figure now walking at his side as if they had been there from the start covered from nose tip to the pointed toe boots in a heavy indigo cowl edged with something suggesting purple. "Three streets on, a bit of a dead end but I'm sure you can live with that."

"Well that depends." He drawled back sarcastically. "How much are you going to 'tack on' if I take it?"

"Only a few thousand… euros. Not that much, surely."

The hitman drew a business card out of the pocket of his jeans, he wasn't sure why Sonya wore them so often as they weren't remotely as comfortable as his usual slacks, and flicked it up between them held there between his left pointer and middle finger. "Then I'm very glad I added a tip. Five percent is more than enough to prevent you from 'offering' yet more unwanted advice and cover that little tidbit, right?"

From the scowl, he was pretty sure he hit on the 'right' way to deal with this Mist. "Mou… fine."

Replacing the card into the palm of his hand before the other could grip it, either physically or otherwise, he gave them a hard look. "The details…?"

"Please. I have my ways, although I should point out the more you leave with awareness of your previous… ah, affiliation… the less likely the secret will hold." The same fine-boned hand to bat away his concern was then held out demandingly, and although it made him really uncomfortable to hand over this much money without a guarantee of results the hitman reluctantly handed over the bank account details holding the price to have his reputation permanently severed from his person or anyone with similar features. "You've paid for the first part, mou… expect results to show in two to three weeks. You should be fully removed for the best result, not doing so is your own damn fault."

"…that long?"

"Given you asked for anyone who previously knew you to forget your physical features… in the entire world, you really don't have any right to nitpick over how long it's going to take." Snipped the Mist, the hostility due to resentment at a perceived judgement. "Be content we're even going to honor this request, due to… mou, complications… we're forced to demand more strident clauses in our
"I'll be sure to pass it on. New boss being a pain?" Probed the Sun, unsurprised when all his question earned him was a snort of pure derision and the disappearance of his very shady contact.

That particular Mist had a reputation of seeing through what they were paid for, the only reason why he let the other get away with the whole 'first' payment for the job of divorcing him from Renato Sinclair's reputation. Or at least, by the rumors he managed to pry out of a few Italian Mists by being the godfather of another claimed such.

…he supposed only time would tell if he had just made a massive mistake or a decent investment to prevent 'complications' of his own.

It took him two seconds to realize the Mist left him right at the lip of the dead end they pointed out as a better option to deal with something clandestinely. A second to double check how much time he had until his erstwhile tail attempted to 'jump' him, half a second for Leon to finally work enough leeway into slightly stiff fabric to pop out of his cuff and forced an intentional handicap on him, and not even a blink of an eye for the man once known as Renato Sinclair to palm the weight of and fire a pistol into the face of the moron tailing him.

…he didn't have any green and orange painted handguns. Gunmetal grey was perfectly fine with him, if they had any paint. He was also very damn sure the stupid pet he was minding was in his main hand… which just fired the gun in question.

Leon turned back into a baby chameleon, silently burping up a spent brass casing to the ground which hit with a tinkle of thin metal on stone and nosed about the hitman's fingers smugly before going back to catching his dinner buzzing around in the late summer air.

Well that would explain how he managed to lose a small handful of loose bullets over the last few nights.
Chapter 18

(Wednesday the 24th of June, 1970. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

After breakfast, Sonya hugged her brat and reminded him walking the dogs was his responsibility that needed to be done at least twice or more per day before taking off.

Fong would linger a couple days beyond what he planned on, and frankly if there was anyone she'd entrust her brat's safety to it was the man's who little sister was right next to him. However, with the Triad member holding the fort down if Usov spotted something Adrik wasn't equipped for… that freed her to range.

A massive amount of range.

She also took the opportunity with a vengeance. Maybe a bit too hastily, she'd have to pick up either something sweet or strongly alcoholic for her sister later. Tatiana had been trying to tell her about summer-orientated health risks and how to treat sun-poisoning in the northerners in case it came up… but she had been entirely too antsy during breakfast to listen.

Moneglia, being a smaller town stuck between two mountains at the southern edge of a full mountain range, existed in a valley. Sonya, with the freedom of not needing to be anywhere or stay in one spot just in case of complications, took the opportunity to just run up to the peak of the mountain behind her castle and then go the long way around the comune to the peak of the other mountain bracketing her new home.

Just because.

It was really just a tiny bit alarming just how liberating it felt to get out even if the physical exertion was negligible, barely more than light cardio for a Cloud of her skill level. The freedom to run flat out, as long as she picked a path around the civilians?

The exertion soothed a part of her she hadn't realized was so tense. Just... no people, no reputation, no sideways looks that weren't supposed to be judgmental but could be so if she just did something unadvised.

She had been seriously contemplating if she wanted to run back to the other mountain peak or start doing something more constructive when a chill entirely alien to the hot summery day in a near-Mediterranean climate ran down her spine. Bemused but in a much better mood since the start of the summer months, the thief slowed her bounding stride to a moderate walk over the rocky scrubland that marked high altitudes in her region.

"There is... mou, a slight complication with the work I had you do for me." Viper greeted her with, completely disregarding any kind of salutation or polite necessity when she joined the miser at the peak of her goal. "Are you aware of what your fellow godparent is up to?"

"Yes." Sonya admitted bluntly as she picked her way closer, putting the clues together as the Mist obviously already accounted for and expected from her. "He's going to Switzerland then?"

"Hmm... good. I very much appreciate not being in the middle of family drama."

Obviously since the Mist remained there was something else Viper wanted. She was entirely at a loss for what it was, so figured they'd steer any conversation to it and she wouldn't have to embarrass herself by guessing in the dark. "So...? Did he pass something on you needed to tell me?"
"He didn't even recognize me from last Christmas, mou… I keep my business and personal personas unlinked for a reason." The Mist then… there was no other word for it. Viper fidgeted.

A bit speechless, the thief blanked out on what to do next.

Which very obviously was not a reaction the Esper wanted, and the aggravated sigh heaved at her just reinforced that very blatant point. "He got associated rather highly up Vongola's ranks."

"…yeah?"

"You're teaching Lady Vongola ballet."

"That's… not a good method to go anywhere." Sonya pointed out, not really all that surprised Viper knew full well what she was getting up to. "I can introduce you to her… only if her Tutor agrees, but I don't see how that might help you given the details I'm aware of."

It was Cherep's name on the land deed, and the other was an insanely powerful Mist. The type that got disturbingly obsessive about their favored distractions when at a fraction of the other's power. Said other had yet to do something that would necessitate her to force some distance between her household and her brother's more than likely best friend, and it would remain that way up until her fellow Cloud decided the Mist wasn't a friend anymore.

Which would probably be the weekend after never.

…the fucking pansy pushover.

"A tutor?" Eventually prodded the other, with a fully visible scowl.

"A Mafia Home Tutor. Working long-distance to get around the whole connections-poaching issue, since apparently no one in Italy was suitable. Our mother, who I'm entirely willing to play enforcer for if need be."

"Fuck." Was Viper's succinct comment on the whole topic, before changing it. "Mou… what can you get me in exchange?"

"Telling me what Renato's up to, which I already knew, isn't really much of a favor." Under the entirely unseen but certainly felt glare, she hitched up a shoulder in a half-assed shrug. "I do appreciate you came to check, but obviously either you're going to try to fuck with my memory of this meeting or it was allowed for in the leeway whatever he's paying you for."

"It's allowed for, you aren't to forget after all." Dismissed the Mist out of hand, which didn't really address if the other Flame user was going to 'allow' her to remember this conversation. "I didn't exactly foresee the need to screw with the remembrance of anyone this highly networked, mou… and it is for a very good friend of yours, isn't he?"

"…are you seriously out of any other option but me?"

Viper became half-insubstantial, which was an entirely new reaction in Sonya's presence and a bit bewildering for it. "You're the odd-behaving Cloud now living in Italy. If you don't have dealings with Vongola, I'd lower my estimation of the entire syndicate a few dozen notches."

Thinking about it, the Russian sourly decided the Mist had a very good point. It didn't mean she had to refrain from feeling bitchy about it, but the point stood. "I can maybe get you a decent introduction to a master assassin… if."
"Mou... I'm going to regret this." Sighed out the Esper equally as sourly, re-firming their Constructed projection before her. "If what? Who? I'll only agree if I know all the stakes."

"It's only a little information, and in exchange I'll introduce you to Tyr the Sword Emperor the next time he comes around..." She pointed out, a nasty smirk growing at the utterly unimpressed half-expression she could see under Viper's ever-present cowl. "...if you tell me what little boogey-man haunts the Italian Mists."

One of Viper's glowing indigo eyes peered out at her from under the hood in pure, utter exasperation. "Anything a little less obviously suicidal, mou?"

"So, you do know what it is."

"...Sonya, mou, no one ever believes anyone that attempted to bring it up." Pointed out the other in acidic tones, flinging a hand out across the distances they could see for perched on the peak of a mountaintop. "As a matter of fact, I hold strong suspicions the one you're asking about ensured that result itself. Or the other one did it. I am way too busy to deal with that on top of the organization-"

Viper sort of... fluxed in place. Which wasn't nervous, or based in chagrin, and she now half-expected it was entirely faked and aimed to get a reaction out of her assuming based on being such.

"...I thought the whole reason you had me destroy most of the compound they were using was to suggest they all died?" Fake or not, there wasn't any reason to avoid the expected.

It was a good question, after all.

"That was the impression you were to walk away with." Agreed the miser blandly, refocusing their form into one solid image yet again. "However, given I'm humoring the man you're raising a child with at all, very obviously I've just changed a few little details and intend to continue it on a much reduced scale more selectively. Mou, how did you miss that?"

"That boogey-man? Attacked one of my medical students. I kind of want whoever's head to turn into another soup bowl more than I care for what the fuck you're up to."

There was a bit of an odd pause. Viper looked Sonya up and down, considered it, then brought up that flung out hand back in close only to reach up and stroke at the visible jawline thoughtfully.

"...Tyr the Sword Emperor, you say?" Inquired the Mist with a bit of a jarring tone shift, sounding falsely contemplative.

Falsely, because if the damn miser hadn't had a damn good idea for what they could use a personal introduction to a master assassin for she would swallow the loose gem collection she had for paying any number of stupid little fees that came up.

"You'll have to go fetch him for the introduction, but yes. He's currently neck-deep working with the CEDEF right now, and probably goes back for in-person reports now and again." Confirmed the thief blandly, a little tired of the negotiation already and kind of itching for another few loops from mountain top to mountain top. "As a matter of fact, I'd kind of like to talk to him. However, he kind of doesn't have a phone number right now... and with the other topic, you could entirely get away with a personal invitation to explain to Nono what issue is plaguing his homeland’s Mists. As an expert, based on the reputation of a former principal of a Mafia School behind you."

"I'm at least... moderately sure that one you spoke of is dead, mou. Physically, at least."

"I'll dig up his ancient corpse and still get my skull that way." She wasn't actually all that surprised to
hear it, just considering there was an entire network of undead mafia enforcers running around and her own experiences then obviously life after death just sort of happened now or again. "Maybe even nick a few knucklebones for some kind of napkin ring holder. Or dice. I think I'd actually like a pair of dice nowadays."

The Esper snorted dryly. "Is there anything aside helping this particular fancy of yours I can do in exchange for the introduction?"

Sonya gave the other the benefit of the doubt and seriously considered it.

Viper didn't outright charge an exorbitant amount of money in exchange for doing it anyways in spite of whatever feeling they had on the request, which was... somewhat alarming in and of itself. Even taking that into account, an introduction to a master assassin or the fact she knew one was apparently only worth at least a few bits of information on an entity the Mist did not want anything to do with at all.

Were there any other bits of information she'd feel worth maybe continually annoying Tyr for?

The Mafioso started it, admittedly...

"...then I want a profile on everyone remotely connected to this area." She decided, belatedly recalling the fact she honestly didn't really know who else was around and what flavor of crime they favored. "I know the Superbi to the north, but beyond them... they either weren't high-profile enough to be gossiped about or still trying not to attract my attention while they do... whatever it is."

Viper knew what she wanted to know, if it was a matter of distance then she could always get the information later on once the Mist was assured of whatever concern.

Sonya could wait.

What was curious was that the other was confronting her about needing specific connections. Either this was the best route through Italy's various chains of associations to reach either Lady Vongola, Nono, or Tyr... or going through her would cost the Mist less than another way they knew of. Or just she herself was costing the miser less for more, and given job descriptions between the two of them?

A thief knew perfectly well there was value in even strange things, and information brokers needed information on even strange things.

In the end, she did get something very... interesting.

That one she was lethargically hunting for couldn't be an assumption reinforced by the Constructed fears of little Mists, not if Viper was wary of whatever it was. The fact said Misty boogey-man was apparently dead and yet could still make a nuance of itself... well... that just made things more interesting. The possibility that there was two that she might be hunting...?

At the very least, asking about the entity in Italy was apparently unsafe.

Pity.

"As soon as you get me those dossiers, and something to summon you by the moment Tyr swings around again from whatever he's doing if you don't go pick him up yourself, I'll introduce you."

"You sound confident he will be of use." Viper observed a tiny bit pointedly, however what aim the Mist had in sounding that way was lost on the Russian. "And that your introduction will be worth the
effort of those reports."

"He and Bjørn have some kind of deal going on, I'd expect at least a monthly check in until whatever it is finishes and a little more preference until whatever it is ends."

"…are you seriously informing me that I could've just spoken to your Lackey, mou?"

"Yes.″ She confirmed, even if the Mist Flames were getting a bit out of hand from sheer irritation over there. "And through my Lackey you are a known element to Tyr already… if only through Bjørn's work ethic."

Viper only waited just long enough to pin her with an ugly glare before winking back out of existence the same way the image had come in, reinforcing Sonya's assumption it was very much like one of the Mirror Lady's reflections. Not quite present in reality, but just enough to suggest a controlled Construction.

…well, she was pretty sure the miser wouldn't take offence for long. Deception should've been a very obvious tactic when you needed something but the other could use more than just you. Needless to say, Sonya probably was not Viper's favorite person right now.

Hmm… alas.

(ooo0000oo)

(Wednesday the 24th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Alek whined from below, having practically been shadowing Sonya's steps ever since she got back for a mid-afternoon shower and a late lunch, flatly refusing to get distracted with whatever his brother was up to on the other side of the table. Exasperated, his owner scooped the young animal into her lap to quiet the puppy before cutting up the other half of her lunch to eat one-handed.

"Anyone that remotely believes I have any fucking idea what I'm doing is utterly retarded."

"That is not quite the point.″ Fong returned peacefully, curiously trying something new again if only for the excuse to join her. He didn't mind the food was mostly based in Russian cuisine, although he was rather disappointed her cook had no idea how to do steam buns. "Others will merely assume you do know until informed otherwise, either through action or word or until they specifically challenge something you do. I merely meant to point out such does actually cover a fair amount of 'infringement'."

Ignoring Sifu Yaozu's exasperated stare drilling a hole into the side of his head, the Storm gestured wordlessly out the wide ground floor windows to the land beyond them.

"There is more benefit to refraining from clarifying a hard limit to your patrols than making them clear."

Sonya's reaction wasn't particularly encouraging but then again, the woman generally prided herself on being passive to what would normally enrage most Clouds. "I already made my limits clear to at least one person, and I did not ask him to refrain from spreading it around. I have some reason to believe it has at least been spread to one if not two of my new neighbors."

He considered that detail. "Do you then believe the idea isn't a good one?"

"It's a good idea… I just am not going to have the time or effort to pour into it." With a shrug, she pointedly pushed her plate away from the edge of the table and the little white muzzle topped with a
black nose sniffing hopefully in the direction of her late meal. "It's the same issue I'd have with setting up a protection racket. I don't have the effort or people for it nor could I guarantee year-round protection without more hands, which I am not interested in getting or charging for a service I do not intend to give. Expanding the territory I will accept responsibility for will just cut into the time I'll have for other things, like my brat."

"The school Ming and the other children will be sent to is the town over." Fong reminded her, spreading his hands apart when she shot him a pointedly flat look. "That is outside the limits of protection you've set."

There was a moment of full silence before the woman uttered a very vehement curse word and slapped a hand to her forehead even if it startled her pet. "...I forgot about that."

"Plans change." He soothed, giving Mingxia a fond smile as she brought out a large bowl of fried rice and with a number of pan-fried pork dumplings to go along with it. "It would not surprise many to hear you found the previous limitation as too cramped for you, at least as long as they are aware of your unusual situation."

Sonya stole his previous plate of mashed potatoes and oval-shaped meatballs to eat herself, without waiting for the martial artist to decide if he was finished with it or not. Her now empty plate was set aside, still far enough her young animal companion could not hope to snatch a quick bite of starchy leftovers if he hopped up to the table.

As his younger sister passed out smaller bowls to hold the rice and set the plates of food she brought out almost in front of Fong, he didn't remotely mind the theft.

Italians and Russians seemingly ate lunch later than most, which was just a curious thing to make note of and account for. Sonya was merely eating at the latest apparently acceptable time, for himself and his fellow Asian natives it was more a mid-afternoon snack.

"...Yaozu? Would you mind sort of arranging a neighborhood watch group once you have the students to lead it?" The elderly man took his first bite of the rice with a pointedly raised eyebrow, electing not to respond at first. "I said a protection racket is more trouble than it's worth right now, and I mean it. However, if I'm to widen 'my' territory... at the bare minimum I'd need more hands to help you all remain safe while gone. What's more, if they do it for free..."

Yaozu still did not seemed very impressed. "As long as the conduct and duties are also left up to me to decide."

"And you mostly report any suspicious activities to either Hawk or Adrik." Sonya tacked on agreeably. "While most of those that will act up will likely be home-grown issues you are more than welcome to deal with... anything imported will likely be fully aware of what I am and equipped to either evade or combat me. I'd prefer you leave that kind of mischief to us."

"I suppose that much I can agree with... however I still do not fully understand what it is you two are counting on to discourage the obvious."

"That's going to have to wait for a few more hours." Sonya responded blandly, pointing her fork at the plate of dumplings between them all. "I'd bet pretty highly that Fong's not going to want to spar until well after he's done with that."

"Are you certain simply going up the mountain will be enough? We did... rather shake up that island, everyone was aware of what was going on." He would refrain from defending himself about his little sister's fried dumplings, even if she giggled into her sleeves in delight next to him.
"Not your headquarters. Besides the island is a separate concern, given what it is."

Fong blinked slowly, realizing that she did have a very valid point. Mafia Land was an artificial island, while it was large enough to be not prone to pitching from side-to-side even in moderately rough seas it still could list and yawn in the ocean given enough outside forces acting upon it. The thief had once been charged with damaging the island, but he did not know if it was only for the forest she destroyed attempting to behead him or for any damage done to possible methods used to negate instability due to the very nature of the landmass.

He did know that the further away from Sonya's terraforming fighting style one was, the less it seemed like a minor earthquake and more like almost invisible tremors. Hong Kong was no stranger to earthquakes from the building-toppling to the barely noticeable, however it was mostly due to their few Mists that the Wo Hop To Triad had to them that no one outside of their ranks noticed the utterly uncomfortable Storm-Cloud residing with them doing a bit of demolishing.

"…there are still the tunnels below to be aware of, complete or not." Decided the Storm slowly, happily snagging another of Mingxia's fried dumplings to savor over his rice. "Collapsing any of those will end poorly, if not for us then for the construction workers or whomever it is traversing the mountains by them."

"As I'm not utterly pissed off, nor confined beyond comfortable limits, I'll pull back a little bit and not break the ground as much. Or you." Sonya offered fairly, glancing down to the hallway her own sister was down conducting the last few checkups needed by her household. "Tats probably won't be impressed to be asked to heal a few broken bones for each of us and I really need the practice not outright killing opponents. Besides which, I'm fairly confident I can sneak up on you mid-fight instead of need to wrong-foot you to get in a hit."

It was entirely likely she had a point. The last couple of times they had the opportunity she very nearly managed to utilize her stealth against him even compromised, or the situation was in too tight of quarters to make use of the skills.

Then again, Fong had learned a few new tricks since last time. Some of which were learned because he theorized they might provide him with more options in the face of stealthy or sneaky opponents like her.

"Old man Yaozu, I'd appreciate it if you went and convinced Verde to come along." Continued the grey-eyed Russian, polishing off Fong's mashed potatoes and taking the last bite of the oddly shaped meatballs in her fingers to feed her delighted puppy with. "If only because Verde's fully aware of what I can do and will provide a solid shield to stand behind if need be."

"Not Galina?" Fong inquired while the elderly martial arts master pondered the request.

"She's busy, Verde needs a few distractions before he eats through everything we can task him with until his labs are done and he's free to research whatever to his heart's content." Stacking her lunch dishes on top of one another, she reached over and snagged the second-to-last dumpling to eat herself. "Besides, even if playing immovable force to my overwhelming backwash bores him… he needs the practice in using his Flames in non-controlled settings."

His old master looked highly interested in the opportunity to not only observe a mid-to-high level spar but the opportunity to observe more practical uses of Dying Will Flames.

That was at least two. Fong glanced to his side and his still mainly silent little sister. "And you, Ming?"
"I think I will stay here, big brother." Demurred the young Rain with a simple shake of her head. "I've seen you two fight before, just try not to remove all the trees growing up there... and Mrs. Zinaida's bee hives."

"...fuck." Sonya swore under her breath, allowing her puppy to leap for the floor before getting up and snatching the empty dishes to return to the kitchen. "I'll find her and get some directions... or a guide."

"We shall meet you in say... two hours?"

"Sounds good. I think she and her husband were moving today, then the other pair will move tomorrow, so there's no real telling where she's at unless Usov isn't too distracted."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 24th of June, 1970 continued. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Verde blinked slowly as he was peppered with still burning ash next, adjusting where the weight of his glasses came down on the bridge of his nose with an absent movement but otherwise remaining where he stood.

There was nothing he could practically do aside remain in place, even if there was now a risk for a particularly bad forest fire sprinkled around the scrubland flecking this portion of the high mountain side.

"Are... you alright?" Inquired Usov's mother slowly, in spite of her worried tone firmly not moving from behind the Lightning's admittedly slighter form.

"I feel no adverse effects, if that is what you are inquiring." He confirmed blandly, casting a glance backwards to the two sheltering behind him as another two trained individuals seriously attempted to kill each other further up the mountain near the peak. "However, if you do not feel as if remaining is safe you may call upon your son to relocate your presence somewhere secure. If you wish."

The scientist wasn't inclined to leave himself, if only to observe how two more experienced Flame users utilized their abilities and compare two different Storm users. The lack of opportunity to record his observations was irking, although a risk even he could not dedicate even a portion of his mind to as it would take his attentions away from guarding the non-Flame enabled sheltering behind him. He was fully aware of Sonya's ability to overcharge pure force and Propagate her own weaponry, intimately due to his rapid training regime on Mafia Land, although Fong's ability to summon a shaped flare of Storm Flames in the form of a Chinese dragon was very interesting beyond how he countered the thief's tactics.

Apparently, his patron had less 'light' combat uses for her Storm Flames. Which might be prudent for someone engaged in stealth-heavy careers, given the Storm-Flame dragon her opponent had used set alight a tree which... exploded. Likely due to high temperatures boiling the sap in tightly confined spaces.

The slight and very visible complication to the combat practice between two Storms had rained burning splinters on Verde's position and the two sheltering behind his Hardened form, although both combatants had utilized their own Storm Flames to avoid being peppered with burning wooden shrapnel themselves.

He could record his observations later, as well 'pester' both for clarifications once they were done
attempting to brutally murder each other.

The elderly individual who invited him out here finished inspecting his form closely, although the concern was unneeded in this case the care extended for his benefit was not, then glanced to where his former student was attempting to wait out his opponent's sudden disappearance. "I begin to see what they were speaking of..."

"Did you doubt them?" Curious.

"It is one thing to claim, another to bear witness to." Flattened, slightly disfigured hands smoothed over a stubborn chin. "And further, an entirely different matter to be able to utilize an ability in the heat of battle when normal use would be deliberate and planned out."

Verde actually had some experience in what the elder spoke of and knew in spite of Sonya's and Adrik's efforts he was not actually very good at doing it with his defense. They assisted him in summoning his Lightning Flames when startled or under a clear and present threat, however he still needed to be alerted before he could properly react. He simply did not have the experience to differentiate an overt attack from a clandestine one and did not intend to gain it.

Returning his attention back to the on-going 'spar', the Lightning realized he might be unintentionally sabotaging himself with such views.

If he was not expecting laboratory explosions... accidents were by nature unintentional byproducts of certain labors, he might actually be rather embarrassed upon and if he awoke afterwards. "...master Yaozu, what would you recommend to train a reaction to second nature?"

The elderly Asian combat instructor eyed him sideways. "Practice."

"I feared you may state-" Verde couldn't quite prevent the sucking in of a bracing breath, moderately glad that once her weaponry was out of her immediate presence Sonya's Propagations tended to lose their rigidity rapidly.

The half-formed hammer that struck him in the face shattered into purple Flames after contesting his Hardening, all he was left with was a slightly sore feeling that gratifyingly faded quickly. It felt much as someone swatting him on the nose might, unlike what another may feel... or not feel once said individual lost their head due to the force behind the weapon.

"...such." He finished belatedly, privately very pleased his spectacles tended to wick his Flames away from his face sometimes and remain intact for a minor amount of facial pain in exchange.

"See me on the morrow." Yaozu decided firmly, as Zinaida finally followed the better digression part of valor and called upon her son to evacuate her back to the castle's grounds to prevent taxing Verde's defenses too far. "I promise nothing until then, but if I can assist you I do not believe I will mind."

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(Friday the 26th of June, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Tatiana very nearly ran into her sister's back when they were supposed to be on their way to pre-breakfast things, distracted as she was with pondering how to bully Verde into a medical check he did not see as necessary. "What?"
"...it's too quiet."

Confused, because it was always quiet here, she took a second to see what Sonya meant.

Admittedly the last few days was full of doors being opened only to be shut the next available moment as most of those on the second floor moved out to their own homes, but that constant low-level hum of nearly constant movement had ceased as everyone finished resettling.

With it being bright and early there were a few sounds as some others moved from their beds to the bathrooms or down for breakfast, and most of those were either an entire floor away or muted due to the books now lining the walls. Aside Alek breathing contentedly in the thief's arms and apparently his littermate enthusiastically greeting Shamal collecting him for their morning routine, there was only Verde left on this level with them and that man was not a loud one either.

"Is that a problem?"

Her baby sister was silent for a moment, then visibly shook it off and resumed moving. "It just... startled me."

Even if she tried to pretend it didn't remotely bother her, Sonya was still a little too jumpy seeming for Tatiana to fully buy it. Contrary little shit, she tried so hard to not show how much having so many people nearby bothered her... and now apparently it bothered her to not have them all at hand.

Oh well. Sonya wouldn't be the baby sister she loved if the younger woman had any idea how to deal with other people.

The sisters split up at the staircase leading to the ground floor, the Storm-Cloud taking her puppy out for a morning walk and to do her stretches before breakfast and the Sun aiming to go up a level and crash Galina's morning preparations.

She was 'technically' done with checkups, she just had a few more to bother and nag into a health check. One of which was Sonya's assassin-chef, a particular Lightning scientist previously mentioned, and maybe Scruffy but he had a few more scheduled appointments with Doctor Kappel pending so that one could actually slide.

Because of course Galina was awake before her, the woman always was, Tatiana let herself into the Lightning's bedroom while the Mirror Lady was listing off more minor details from the nightly report she had to give. Anna inclined her dark head in greeting but didn't stop speaking softly of the few bumps in the night that happened while everyone else was asleep.

"I believe that one goes in the 'we don't remotely care' category, Mirror Lady." Galina observed tartly, finishing with the kohl eyeliner and the last of the makeup she wore like war paint. "Did you need something, Boss Lady?"

"Checkups are mainly done, Nya's jumpy today so brush by her a few times if you could, and... no. Not really." There was an actual mortar and pestle sitting on the makeshift vanity that could easily double as a desk if you just removed the mirrors, and a few unpolished rocks sitting next to the heavy soapstone tool. "So... did you turn your blush into armor?"

"Of course I did." Galina dismissed huffily, glancing over her equipment once to be sure everything that needed to be sealed up was before turning away from them and actually looking at her visitors. "Might even start up a makeup line myself, as soon as we work out proper variations and useable minerals for other Flame types."

"That doesn't really cover your arms or chest." Pointed out the Sun fairly, a bit interested in spite of
herself. "Maybe a complementary jewelry line to match?"

"What can they do I can't?"

"...very good point."

Galina tossed her perfectly coiled if half-loose hair in faked arrogance, getting up and elevating her nose into the air snootily. "Besides, the blush is only to help my Flames grab hold of something. I can Harden my skin if I have too, but next time I hope to break someone's hand on my face if I can."

"Admirable goal, kind of wish I could arrange for that too." Tatiana teased, shooing the younger girl off. "Go to sleep, Anna. You already look dead on your feet, and if that was the best you had from last night Nya's not going to be interested. I'll pass anything on you feel can't wait."

Obviously thinking about it first, Anna sighed and wavered in form. "Alright, there really wasn't much interesting happening last night. Oh... but we did start a... well... I cheated a bolt of spider silk cloth into existence. Pavuchky and I tried by hand first, it didn't go well."

"Sounds good." The only question was which sister would get the first bolt. Tatiana was not averse to waiting it out to get a thimble of silk and a fair quality if smaller than preferred bolt of silk to boot, but Sonya also probably needed something of quality to test her own ideas on it with her pet scientists. "Have a good morning, Anna."

The little Mist bobbed a polite nod, turning on her heel and actually physically going through the connected bathroom to her own room beyond.

"I suspect," Galina informed her quietly as the two of them headed out for breakfast, a bit early but they could always chat until Ruslana and her brand-new scullery maid could finish the basics of the normal breakfast buffet, "the Mirror Lady is utilizing the late-night work to help her avoid human contact."

"That's not entirely a bad thing." Confessed the Sun wryly as she followed her old friend down the stairs. "As long as she can interact with people when she wishes to and can equally avoid them when she's feeling more Misty than usual. Anna's always been a very smart girl, give her the benefit of doubt until she's very obviously harming herself with the isolation."

"I'd feel better about it as soon as we have someone else to attach to the night guard for her to work with." Countered the Lightning, taking a bit of a pain to avoid sounding bitchy. "Just because she's young, and probably doesn't know what she really wants right now."

"Like any of us know that." Mists might actually be the few to be able to do complete isolation, no one really fucking knew yet.

From the sigh she gave, Galina was entirely aware of that detail and didn't appreciate the reminder of how little they really knew.

Interestingly, instead of moving on to the kitchens to take note if they needed a grocery run today or possibly tomorrow and leave her to wait for her nephew, the Lightning hesitated.

"...what's up?"

"I'm aware I... ah, came into my Flames a bit later than normal." The brunette started with delicately, turning around slowly to face Tatiana's moderately surprised expression full on.

"However, in a few of my electrician's texts there's a couple warnings against 'flash blindness'. Which I traced backwards through a welder's manual to 'photokeratitis' or 'ultraviolet keratitis', the
Tatiana pursed her lips and crossed her arms under her chest a little defensively, a bit displeased at this possible complication. "Eyes are an entire branch of doctoring, 'Lina. Way too complex, I'd normally refer anyone with an issue to a specialized ophthalmologist."

She might be looking into it, given her boyfriend’s missing eye, but ‘looking into it’ and ‘expert’ were not equitable.

"Verde's probably not a good example, being later than I to our Flames. However, if you're going back to Moscow you can then at least keep an eye out for similar issues in my former lecture group."

"So... what happened to make you convinced this might be an issue for Lightnings?"

"It was pretty hard to note." Galina temporized instead of spill details on the event, waving a green nail tipped hand at her to slide that by without mention. "And I cannot with any kind of certainty say it is due to my Flames being brighter than any light source when I use them, however I have noticed there's a slight degrade in how far out I can read lettering between now and when we were together last in Germany."

She hummed, unconvinced of a correlation. "Possibility it's just genetic."

"That's why I'm letting you know now, to keep an eye on any patterns developing." Claimed the Lightning, shrugging a bit uncomfortably as she always was when her pre-Zolotov affiliation or family status was brought up. "I'll make the proper appointment the moment I find an optometrist's office, although I do not believe glasses are something I require."

"Abide by your doctor's advice, 'Lina. A set of weak reading glasses now will prevent the necessity of needing Verde-level of coke-bottle glasses later."

A rather rude-sounding harrumph informed the girls the Lightning in question was close enough to hear that, and the somehow still tired-looking man glared at them both rather disgruntledly over the second-floor landing's banister.

"Good morning Verde." Tatiana practically sang on her way out of the castle, maybe a bit more hasty than usual. "Try not to blind yourself until we figure out if flash-blindness is a 'no self-harm' thing or not."

Her nephew, apparently accompanying the scientist down for whatever aim the Frenchman was up so early to accomplish, snickered as he and Marco bounded down the staircase to join her for his morning walk and stretches with his godmother.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 26th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Ziven and Nicolai left last week, Sonya hadn't paid a whit of attention to her sister's fellow gang members much so she didn't really notice when but they were gone now. Dmitriy had left last weekend, entirely too smug about something she didn't bother to pay attention to and was entirely too happy to skip speculating about why. Her only guest currently was Fong. Which while he had been sharing space with Yaozu, him taking one of the now empty second floor guest rooms would not help her current issue much.

Maximillian and Zinaida, with Usov, moved into the very first available house in her front courtyard.
Afanasii and Ruslana, with their son Larion, moved in directly across from them. Both small families were more than utterly fine with the housing provided, even if there was still a barely adequate amount of furniture beyond actual beds and a kitchen table for both of them.

Bizarrely, she now felt entirely too alone in the castle at times. Meal-times were fine, there was no reason to make your own when a meal was provided, but early mornings… and probably later evenings, would be… strange.

She had Shamal and her sister, with Verde still lurking about until his home was done along with an entire floor of people on the third floor, but with three-four empty rooms the entire second floor seemed abandoned somehow.

"I guess I got used to it." Sonya informed Fong slowly, rather annoyed by her own reaction when he asked about her obvious ‘head counting’ during breakfast.

The Chinese Triad member hummed lowly, sipping peacefully at the green tea they stocked more for Master Yaozu than anyone else in the castle. "One can become rather used to a wide arrange of behaviors or situations they would otherwise not appreciate, given just enough time."

"I panicked and went to go check on them immediately this morning." Countered the thief a bit disgustedly, not really ashamed of her actions but disgruntled it took her only seconds to be too tempted to refrain.

"…what would happen if one of your people moved into the village?" Inquired the other Storm curiously, accepting the flat glare she tossed him as an answer. "I see… Sonya, it might not be a bad reaction."

"I. Panicked."

"And while it was an undue reaction to a change too close to home for you, the habit of checking in randomly on those looking to you for protection is not a bad habit to have." He countered, refilling his teacup from the pot they were 'sharing' although he was drinking more green tea than she was black. "Spend a week to adjust, then once the newness is worn off."

"I get it." Cutting him off was rude, she was fully aware of that. It didn't mean it was unsatisfying.

"As long as you know." Countered the martial artist simply, either not taking the bait or he didn't feel like trying to make her mind her manners she could then use to pick a fight with.

Sonya bit her tongue rather than say what she wanted to since Fong didn't seem in the mood for an argument, absently listening to Verde try to argue his way out of being whacked upside the head with a stick for at least a few weeks. Old man Yaozu was not impressed and whacked the scientist in the side of a knee to overrule his wayward student and get the space to lecture the man on not always being able to expect the unexpected.

Even if there was a team of Mists around with a vested interest in preventing the unexpected.

She was actually moderately surprised the Frenchman raised the subject himself with the overly whack-happy old man. Given his attitude entirely when she was helping him learn his ability of Hardening back on Mafia Land, she kind of expected that Adrik's method of forcing it on him was the only way the Lightning would expand his combat repertoire.

Her temporarily borrowed head of security was very put out he had to help inspect the new done guest house construction for listening devices with Usov instead of run interference for Verde, but frankly doing this himself was probably better for the Lightning in the long-run.
Alek finally managed to steal the brush from Shamal, now her brat was done brushing out Marco's fur and he had an opportunity, bolting over to get his grooming time with her in. Going the long way around Yaozu and Verde, her puppy practically dove for her lap before his non-existent chasers could hope to grab him. An insistent series of nudges under her right hand had her taking the brush slimed with dog drool, and the puppy proudly flopped over her lap to luxuriate in his 'hard' won grooming session.

Both animals, probably around three months old now, were slowly growing into their oversized features. Marco didn't seem out of proportions at first glance, but he did have a bit of an oversized head on second look, and the bigger Alek grew the less it seemed his paws were too big for him. The thief was actually hard-pressed to recall the last instance of clumsiness from either this last week, when she was pretty sure right after they got the dogs both would practically fall over one another or just themselves without provocation.

Gamely tugging the plastic brush through the grey dappled white coat as her puppy wiggled in glee, Sonya only tilted her head to the side when someone opened the back doors.

"Miss Bazanvoa… you have two non-Italian guests seeking an appointment with you."

She turned to give Ruslana a confused look over her shoulder, even if Alek whined at her for the slowing of the brush. "I wasn't expecting anyone…"

The greenette glanced backwards too, and then aimed a faintly lost expression back at her. "They claimed to have spoken with your mother, and to be known to your brother and sister."

A second of staring at her, and Tatiana's voice echoed from deeper in the castle speaking something that was not German cheerfully. "Aziz! Rutin orvosi vizsgálat fogok adni, fordulj balra!"

Whatever response was either silent or wordless, given they should've heard any verbal response due to the still open door.

"Okay… so my sister does know one of them." Allowed the Storm-Cloud slowly, tossing Fong the animal brush much to Alek's disgruntled disappointment given the tone of his whine. "So, I suppose I should probably at least ask what the hell they came all the way out here for…"

"Petitioners already." Fong commented rather noncommittedly, seemingly very amused at her latest interruption as he placed the bristled object on the side table with the tea. "You've been bewilderingly busy for someone newly established."

"Yeah, I know." It could entirely be a bad happenstance, or a sign for how utterly screwy the situation around her was. Either or. "I wonder why Lisa didn't say anything about them? We were kind of… busy, I guess. But we had dinner together at least, before she left."

Her visiting Triad guest shrugged instead of posing a suggestion about an event he couldn't know much about and a woman he had not met.

"Alright you pushy brat." Sonya poked at her canine instead of carry on the conversation, going back to teasing out the tangles in the off-white fur with her fingers. "I get distracted, deal with it."

Alek grinned a doggy grin in her face and batted his banner of a tail against her thigh.

(ooo0000oo)

(Friday the 26th of June, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
In the half a year it had taken them to get here, Aziz actually hadn't had much of an idea on how to pay Cherep's little sister beyond 'we could do a sanctuary without much questioning'. Even knowing the stuntman had mourned the lack of any for those like himself or poor Ciceron, when there were more criminally heavy options for those like his sisters, it was admittedly possible the younger did not want or intend to establish one at all and would not like the suggestion.

Now, face-to-face with Cherep's 'not nice' baby sister, the snake charmer regretted not dedicating a more serious block of time to puzzling it out. Her line of questioning, listening to Nahum but not looking away from Aziz as she correctly figured out he was really the one directing things with too few clues, had already touched on and revealed the lack of any idea what to do after she possibly did them this one 'job'.

Sonya de Mort was very different from her older siblings. Cherep was a devil-may-care actor, Tatiana a bit of an obsessive healer as she could be while also being armed and willing to use it, but Sonya was as much of a brick wall as her mother had been… just not as personable in it.

After his old childhood friend and faithful companion of now finished detailing everything to her satisfaction, from how they came up with this idea and most of the story on how they arrived on her doorstep, the willowy blonde silently packed a tobacco pipe with shredded tan leaves before speaking up in perfectly serviceable French. "I am rather surprised you continued this far, admittedly. After two others of my family informed you this was a bad idea."

"Actually," Aziz spoke up for himself, letting the usually useful illusion of Nahum being the one in charge between them fall to the side as it apparently was not believed, "we were only informed by Cherep you would not appreciate the bargain. Your mother refrained from commenting."

"To clarify, I am not amused." Allowed the younger woman flatly, lighting her pipe with a thumbnail. "The fact Lisa didn't say you would find help here is her condemning your aims."

"That is not a flat refusal." He pointed out in turn softly.

"...I like a challenge." Sonya admitted, blowing out her first lungful of smoke between them all carelessly. "However, that doesn't mean I appreciate more complications."

Nahum, seated next to him, bristled at the careless tone. Aziz lifted a hand without glancing to the side, because she had a very good counterpoint to the possibility of doing them this favor. "What would convince you?"

"Cute attempt, but not my problem." A dismissive wag of a pipe stem, and the woman allowed herself to be distracted by the pale furred puppy that stretched into her thigh as he continued napping. Nimble fingers threaded through the off-white strands, idly scratching the ruff of the animal slowly. "The main issue I see for your aims right now is the contenting with the United States of America about their 'illegal' military occupation of stolen land. Not a particularly new tactic for them, and one they have historically gotten away with without issue in the past. That will not be easily or neatly dealt with, and I'm talking either months or possibly years of steady work."

"I had never entertained a fancy I might be able to go home over the years until recently, while I do understand my standing now is of no real value… if you can restore my homeland I may have-"

"May." Cut off the younger woman pointedly without looking up from the tools in her hands.

Depressing, but true. He was one of possibly several former or son of a land owner who may wish for their lands back. "You would not continue to speak with us if you saw no value in what we brought forward."
"I see a value, yes. That value does not eclipse the worth of my possible investment of time or effort. At least, not just yet." One tattooed shoulder shrugged at them, the owner idly teasing strands of fur much to the bewildered and sleepy confusion of her pet. "I don't pay myself, for your information."

"That is still not a refusal." Aziz pointed out in turn. "We have not been thrown out on our ears."

"Because Cherep does have a point, as much as I dislike the fact you've brought this to me in hopes I can solve it. You have a way, however complicated getting it will be for anyone involved." Sonya inspected the both of them, glancing next to the window showcasing the front grounds of her castle property as her puppy wiggled closer to resume napping without her tugging so much on his fur. "And I have a will, and some understanding on how to do it through illegal and legal means. However, I cannot and will not do charity. That will not help you nor I at all, and frankly I can't afford it."

Smoothing fingers down the raised pattern of tattooed scales on the back of each hand, the Mauritian native puzzled over why they had not been given an irrefutable denial and tossed from her presence yet.

His father had done worse to those with a better plan to give him, asking a fraction as much effort.

"I foresee a few massive issues even beyond my possibly and hopeful temporary involvement." Continued the full-fledged criminal of a trio of siblings when neither Nahum nor Aziz said anything in response to her very accurate summary of the details, narrowing grey eyes into the middle distance as she thought through the proposal. "In order to be successful in your aim to be a sanctuary, you need to be known. In order to prevent any from hunting through you anyways in spite of your claims, you are going to need some backing. Both need to be gained without being stabbed in the back, both at the time of recruiting and once established."

"Backers." Concluded the snake charmer thoughtfully. "Would that not put the end result we hope for at risk?"

"If mishandled, yes." Sonya confirmed simply, ruffling her animal companion's ears as the puppy woke up more and glanced over them all to be sure nothing significant had changed while he napped. "If approached the right way and slid into a few concerns we already uphold due to oaths or vows, perhaps not. It is the only way you could possibly pay me enough to mitigate the stress of this... 'request', and not fail your end horribly without the time I cannot spare you anyways. At least, until you have enough of our numbers that do not want illegal crimes to be how they make their livelihoods."

...damn, and Skull had taken Mauricio with him on his world tour. While finding investors was not a rare event in any carnie's life... few liked sponsoring freak shows.

Aziz would not regret his Manas Tirtha pilgrimage, he had learned much on his journey and had come away with more than he realized he had at the beginning. He had hoped to merely earn peace after losing his home and what rights he arrogantly had assumed would be his in time, but the lure of possibly being able to return home and finally finish his journey was too alluring to give up upon without a flat refusal.

"What would you advise, then?"

The smirk that grew on the woman's face was not encouraging, however innocently she seemed to be at first glance petting a snoozing young animal and holding a pipe in her other hand. "There's ways to handle my work and effort to pay later, officially. I won't go over it with you, there's no reason for you to know, and until I have any remote idea how to return the land to the previous
natives I won't accept responsibility. However, I'm fairly sure there are certain organizations run by others who would be interested in a 'dumping ground' for poor students. Eventually, a place to contain the foolish might be acceptable after enough effort is put forth. There is at least one woman I know of who would be interested in supporting your aim with her influence. Beyond them… well, there's one more that might be able to direct you in a way… but you would need to actually pay them."

"That is all uncomfortably vague." Nahum pointed out in his pleasant baritone, when he failed to respond at all.

"Deal with it." Was the short and dismissive rebuttal. "The only reason I will listen to this proposal is only due to the influence I can gain from doing it, which is significant enough to overlook your ill-preparation to speak with me. That's one shady 'connection' you've already spoken to, and to get anything done you will need more to provide what you can't right now. The one I will point you into the direction of is safe enough, I know fully well why and how they will be willing to hear you out. It's up to you and her how much or if she will at all."

"What do you gain from this?" Continued his long-suffering childhood friend, who had been at Aziz's side since they left the Salomon Atoll with the others evicted by Great Britain and he chose to dedicate his life to traveling in search of peace of mind.

"I had a… childhood goal. This might not be it, or it might be a step." Sonya shrugged again, settling the stem of her pipe between her teeth only long enough to draw in a lungful of smoke. "Either way, I have a quota you can be put to. What you suggest is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of job. If, if, you can correctly figure out how to 'hire' me… being credited with stealing a military base out from under the nose of the United States? I can use that. So, it's tempting enough to overlook your shitty preparations to discuss or pay for the work you need."

Aziz stopped pressing his fingertips into the raised edges of his full body tattoos. "You will not promise to aid us."

"Not right now, no. You are way too early to be speaking with me." The woman gestured out the window showing newly constructed housing and her front gate in the distance. "Go north. Genoa. Seek out the Superbi Famiglia, and their current guest the Lady of Vongola. Make a damn appointment, she cannot promise anything the same day you seek her influence. Try to put your 'proposal' into business terms, because even if she likes your idea... there are other elements she needs to account for. Doing most of the work for her will enable her to help you more."

"Will she speak with us?" He inquired skeptically. Sonya might be known, and her modest tattoos overlooked as a section of one bicep could be covered easily… but many would not overlook his for most reasons.

"She might not." Dismissed the blonde simply and without much care. "That's more your issue than mine."

Aziz clapped a calming hand on Nahum's shoulder, squeezing silently in appreciation of his faith as the muscles of his lifelong friend relaxed incrementally. He ran this entirely strange conversation with this individual through his mind yet again, sure he was missing something.

He couldn't figure it out.

"We will be back."

"I'm aware… you intend to." Sonya allowed, rather concerning, as she rose to her feet and her
puppy startled awake at the sudden unexpected movement from her. "Step lightly."

He leaned backwards, waiting for the young animal to bolt after his owner and for both to leave them
alone in a half-furnished sitting room this meeting took place within. Glancing to the side, and he
was not remotely surprised to see the darker skinned man was rather irritated at their dismissal. "I
believe… that was a warning."

Nahum blinked at him, confused at the non sequitur. "Aziz… what?"

"We may have overstepped ourselves somehow."

If… well, they were dealing with something else. A different culture, perhaps… there was a
possibility that the culture they existed alongside had enough of a parallel to understand with a little
effort.

Something ancient or established enough to control Skull's intentions and generate a wish to 'save'
another who would not 'do well' within it. A hard to miss and valuable set of abilities had remained
firmly divorced from public awareness and remained there to the point in Aziz's whole lifetime he
had only run into a healer using Dying Will Flames through the grace of a fluke.

 Barely in time to save his life.

"On our way north, I need you to do me a favor Nahum." The heavily tattooed snake charmer
admitted, getting up to leave and fully aware they were likely being spied upon given the warnings
Cherep passed to Ciceron the rest of them couldn't stop speculating about between their leaving and
meeting up again in England.

His old friend sighed as he followed with, and he didn't need to look back to know the man was
forlornly touching the bone that went through his septum. "Alright… but you owe me a new one."

"Of course."
Chapter 19

(Monday the 29th of June, 1970. Cavallone Famiglia Ranch, Outside Olbia, Sardinia Island, Italian Republic.)

Shamal scrambled up to the wooden fence outside the place they were going the minute they were in a decent range to have a good look into the paddock, almost bouncing up on his toes in order to get himself a good sightline of the horses doing absolutely nothing interesting.

Basically, walking around a fenced in field and dozing in the strong Italian summer sun. Normal horse stuff. Real entertaining to watch.

The members of the Cavallone Famiglia were apparently horse ranchers on the side. On an island. With a corner dominated over racing and breeding horses, and the betting racket around horse racing, in the Italian mafia. Which were the 'only' ones that trained horses to ignore the odd Flame user needing a lift, or at least any inquiry she passed through Mrs. Silvery-white about finding a Flame-friendly horse ranch always resolved to 'speak with the Cavallone, Sonya'.

Even armed with a phone line and a phonebook Galina couldn't find anything else, not without incriminating herself or spilling the beans to civilian operated ranches. Which wasn't really surprising given the limitations the Lightning had to maneuver around, and the natural inclination natives had to be mildly suspicious of foreigners asking about anything.

"Which horse are we going to take home, mamma?"

"None of these, probably." Sonya informed him blandly, twitching a smirk at the pout he shot at her. "We're going to get a retired mare, and maybe a suitable pair of middle-aged horses, and that's about it. In a couple weeks, after Zinaida qualifies as a stable hand so we can take care of them right."

Usov's mother was entirely willing to learn to handle any animals they might need, thankfully. Mainly through sheer and pure agreement someone needed to do it aside any real personal interest. The older brunette had also wryly muttered something about being the 'Bee Lady, not the Beast Mistress' of the blonde's castle staff, but Sonya was going to continue ignoring that for the sake of her sanity.

There was a fairly well-traveled dirt lane, with the two worn tire tracks and a strip of greenery between that only rarely saw foot traffic, she was standing on. Aside the paddock her brat was so fascinated with containing a few horses getting some air, there was the stable-barn thing at one end and what was probably a small manor house.

If that contained actual mafia members of the Cavallone Famiglia or not was beyond her, which was mildly annoying fact to not be sure of. Galina had set up a meeting for her with someone inside, but the whole 'not native' thing the Russian natives were dealing with while in Italy kind of made it questionable if they had remotely done the whole conversation right to get what they were after. …she should've asked Renato how to do it. While the asshole had still been lingering around. Hindsight perhaps, but she hadn't thought about it in time.

Then again, there would always be just one more thing a native Italian would've been more than useful for and she'd go through this annoyed-irritated-resigned-depressed loop again when it came to the missing hitman anyways. Besides which Alek and Marco had to be left behind for this trip so she
didn't have puppy fur to distract herself with, which meant she didn't feel like going in any more emotional loops right now.

Shamal, after another few moments of admiring the display of resting horseflesh, slid off the wooden fence and joined her again for the long-winded walk to get to the actual place they were going. Being a Mist, he effortlessly combined the whole production of sticking close to her and eyeing the horses without much more than a chilly ghosting of his Flames here or there in order to prevent walking into the back of her thigh.

Mildly annoyed there was no longer a reason to put this off even a few more moments, Sonya refocused on at least trying to politely get through the whole 'meeting' coming up without terrorizing someone accidently.

…which was still a concern. She actually kind of genuinely sucked with trying to talk to people not used to her or confident she had no reason to think poorly of them. What was more she was getting stumped trying to avoid terrifying certain groups, because as sure as shit they'd get terrified anyways even when she was trying… or not.

Irritatingly, the man that came out of the bright orange roof tiled island homestead at their more obvious disinclination to obey the laced Mist Flames insisting this ranch was uninteresting did not look particularly expectant of their arrival. A much older gentleman than she was used to dealing with, who had slicked back his mostly dark hair only peppered with grey at the temples to go with an almost-uniform he wore with the same ease she did with a pair of jeans and a light sweater top. A simple black leather vest which wouldn't look too out of place in a three-piece suit most Mafiosi would attempt to wear, a pair of beaten jeans most apparently wouldn't be caught dead in, and a pair of very scuffed cowboy boots. Left his arms rather bare, and although not for a series of tattoos as a vor might do it but a whole mess of scars peppering both limbs and refusing to tan with the rest of him.

Intrigued, because this was shaping up to be a likely retiree or old Mafioso of Italy's mafia and she couldn't actually say she met one before this, the thief refused to feel more than mildly exasperated they had obviously been wrongly informed or deceived somehow.

"Coffee?" Invited the man after studying the pair of them walking down his drive, apparently not going to bother being surprised or upset at this imposition. "Ah… Russians, right? I believe I heard through the grapevine… you do black tea instead, Miss Bazanova?"

"Coffee is fine, although I take mine with sugar and some milk." Sonya dismissed blandly, hitching a shoulder up to showcase her indifference to the subject of refreshment. "I think… we've been rather redirected poorly. It was insisted to my usual secretary that this is where we had to go to obtain a trio of preferably retired mares for wilderness trips into the rather mountainous region we live in, who wouldn't spook if my brat would like a ride. To my face as well. I have… the hands and the space available, and horses can take themselves back to their barn if there are any unexpected complications with their rider."

"Yes, and not quite." Agreed the older than comfortably middle-aged man with an admirably lax manner, inviting the two of them inside with a wordless gesture rather easily for someone she suspected had a less than honest past. "I can certainly help, if you wish to stable and take up the cost of a few horses past their prime in exchange for their use. Although, this isn't normally done this way than by other channels. Most of the horses here are… not used to any special skills."

"I figured."
"Any riding experiences?" He asked, around catching a 'Filippo's' attention for the drinks and gesturing the two of them to an obvious side-parlor affair off the entrance instead of an office room almost immediately after they entered the building.

"Brat's done a short course through the Vongola private school trips, although I would feel a hell of a lot better about it if he'd take more orientated lessons somewhere before we get a horse." Shamal threw her a dirty look for that, but noticeably didn't argue that he had more than enough experience as he made a beeline for the couch and left the armchairs open for the adults. Obviously, there was a telling incident she should probably ask about later. "I've, a long time ago, once rode a horse. It was a... experience."

"I'd bet." Wryly confirmed the guy she was starting to honestly wonder about, not particularly taking her disinclination to have him at her back personally when she chose the armchair furthest from the door for whatever this was shaping up to be and leaving him closest to the only exit from the room. "Now then, this is a Cavallone Ranch. We do rent or lease our elderly horses for young users of Dying Will Flames to learn to ride. However, we also rent out retired race horses as well. Can I interest you in one of them to go along with a pair of older mares conditioned to Cloud and Mist Flames? We had a Lightning jockey, it would only take a little more effort to accustom the retired racer to be fine with your young man there."

"Perhaps... I've Rains, Lightnings, and a Storm so you might as well do conditioning for all types if you have one in mind that would do well with a child or novice rider. And any additional lessons that might be available you offer, or at least a recommendation on where to get them. For a child, an adult, and likely a specific hire of mine to help." Sonya confirmed wryly as she settled in gingerly, because while Rachel once rode a horse it didn't mean she could make use of the mostly forgotten experience in this life. "Riding and caring for the horses, the brat and one of my people's mothers who will likely be the one to take care of any needs of the horses we rent from you. Weekend lessons, preferably. Then a very probable civilian stable hand that will need to know how to stable your horses in a bit of time, when we hire one."

"...all of them?"

"All." She repeated firmly. "We could, easily, just get a few dirt bikes instead. However, brat is very interested in getting horses instead of hearing any other possibility. Being the case, he will learn and help with their care until such time we no longer need a horse around the estate and they will be put to some use."

A twitch of the mouth was smoothed off a fairly weather-beaten face quickly, and flatly ignoring the faces the young Mist was pulling at them both for this discussion into his 'responsibilities', the man simply nodded with an ease she didn't normally see from a mostly unknown criminal. "I see. Rather agreeable. Just to rent?"

"We'll see about anything different later. Much later." A moment spent to study his disinclination to be remotely bothered by her very presence, and she had to give up trying to guess on her own. "Can I ask your name?"

"You may. I am Adelardo, the Cloud Guardian of the Eighth Sky of the Cavallone." With a bit of a wry smirk for her moderate and apparent surprise, her fellow Cloud settled back in his chair even as the same guy he caught in the hallway entered the still open doorway with a tray of something to drink for them. "Guardian or not, we do mellow out with enough age like everyone else, Miss Bazanova."

"...I am utterly relieved to hear it." Even if the too easy tone and his very general personality made her suspicious on the level of 'mellow' she and he might experience at different points in life.
"I take it there aren't many of the older generations of Flame users left in Soviet Russia anymore?"

"If there are, they haven't bothered to meet with me at all." Sonya considered it, but really there was no reason to not anymore, so instead she shot Shamal a dry look when he almost reached for a mug as well. He did not need the caffeine. "We believe I am or was the third or so Flame user to reappear in Moscow after a strange century long gap in any new users. I definitely know of one other present at the time I popped with Flames, and there's a possibility of another in the local area we cannot say for sure was or wasn't when I was younger as that one is a public figure we only belatedly noticed."

"That makes a depressing amount of sense and matches some other reports before all that unpleasantness." Admitted the older Cloud Guardian thoughtfully as the child slunk back with the glass of apple juice supplied instead. "Visconti certainly didn't pass much on, apparently to you as well as us through his available channels. He might not have realized, or suspected... well, no. Given the posturing that you young people seem to always do..."

She was actually disinclined to take offense for once and ignored that. The thief also kept her mouth shut for a moment longer than socially polite, because as much as she had little good to say about Timoteo Vongola that didn't extend to his Guardians she honestly had not spent much time with in order to get to know.

Eventually refocusing on her, and the brat after a moment more of thought, Adelardo cocked a wry smirk for the both of them as he picked up a fairly clunky mug of black coffee. "Aside all that! Let us get the business out of the way first... then perhaps give your dutiful young son the opportunity to have a ride with the stable hands so they can gauge an experience level. While apparently having a much overdue talk, Miss Bazanova."

"Sonya is fine." Cautiously agreed the Storm-Cloud after a moment, when apparently all three of them left in the parlor was or indicated they were all aware that was a distraction for the Mist's benefit alone and perfectly fine with it. "The brat's Shamal. I've a... question. Do you mean Don Visconti, or Visconti Visconti?"

A snort was her initial answer. "Visconti Visconti. It doesn't make much sense when it comes to Don Vongola's Cloud Guardian, does it? I believe he still uses his original name when visiting his former Famiglia's Territory, to make things easier."

From the little way this man spoke on the subject, Don Visconti apparently either a distant acquaintance or not someone he dealt with often. Even with how apparently rigidly Italians viewed the ultimate purpose and life goals of their Flame users, there could not just be one only known source of Cloud Flame users for a place so riddled with Skies as Italy. He also hadn't introduced himself as 'Adelardo Visconti', which was telling either way he came to identify himself without a surname.

It brought up a few curious questions, like if the Cloud Guardian was the last Guardian that Timoteo acquired and that was why the naming convention was a bit skewed when it came to the man. Or if it was a convention to tweak the Rome-based 'Cloud' Famiglia into thinking, or at least making the younger members think, the to-be-Don Vongola at the time had no intention of accepting a 'Visconti' Cloud as his Guardian.

Blatant challenges were an entirely valid way to catch and hold a Cloud's attention from all appearances, even if they didn't really seem like a challenge to anyone else. Regardless, if this man spoke of Don Visconti as someone he only distantly interacted with, it was highly possible he wasn't from the syndicate in question.
Sonya was again disinclined to actually ask, nettled by her still sour feelings over Don Vongola's behavior to both her and his poor wife who was temporarily her student right now. It wasn't a good trap to fall into, because deliberately ignoring the biggest and most influential Italian Mafia syndicate every time they vaguely came up in a conversation was just her slitting her own throat out of spite. This once she would, otherwise she'd spend the entire visit pumping the older Cloud for anything and everything he'd willingly tell her.

Although, from the sound of it, she'd be getting information from this mistake of a business meeting anyways. She honestly could not be bothered to be annoyed by the indirect run around anymore. "Got anything to keep Shamal entertained for a moment?"

There was only a moment of confused suspicion on Adelardo's end, before 'Mist' and 'Shamal' made a reconnection in his head for the obvious 'why' she wouldn't mind not minding her godson personally in unknown territory. That the fact you couldn't, without a stronger Mist on hand or their own agreement, contain a Mist only occurred to him after a moment proved that this one wouldn't be a Cloud well socialized with many Mists.

Per the stereotypes.

It wouldn't really matter, he'd be useful anyways.

Unfortunately, she'd be equally as useful to him on an information gathering side. It wouldn't even be anything she could help, just by asking a question the older Cloud would know full well what she didn't know about even being a Cloud in the first place. She didn't have her mother's, or her sister's, way with words to make the very act of asking the questions in the first place merely innocuous instead of telling.

The mere suggestion the Clouds of Italy kept in contact with each other was interesting. Highly interesting, to the point something she had expected only Vongola-aligned Flame users to be aware of her mere drink preferences extended to a completely different group. Something she started with the Moscow Clouds, but if it actually caught on or if the two brats she found were merely giving her lip service in return for the help remained to be seen.

Maybe it was something only older Clouds could do with any success, or maybe getting to the others early played a key part. That was something time could also tell her, and frankly Sonya was fine with that or getting an early answer from this man.

The older Cloud Guardian waited a few more moments, but when she obviously wasn't going to continue derailing them he set aside his empty mug and unearthed various contracts hidden in the coffee table's side drawers to fill out for what she wanted. "Perhaps the young master wouldn't mind a tour of the stables, and perhaps a bit of an impromptu lesson on caring for a horse, while we fill out the minutia?"

She glanced over, and the brat shot her a mildly guilty look complete with a full out pout as he sat on the matching couch.

"I already know finances are not something that interests you, brat." She snorted softly because it really didn't appeal to her either, leaning back a little stiffly in her chair. Then again, she couldn't actually tell if this was the older man's territory or just part of his Sky's responsibilities he looked over as a Guardian so she couldn't really get comfortable. "If you want to bail while we discuss prices and stable requirements, you can."

Shamal still refused to knock off the guilty look as he plucked at the almost canvas like fabric covering his knees sheepishly. "But you said I had to help take care of them, mamma."
"Yeah, but this will be more Zinaida's side of things than yours." Utterly unsurprised when the kid did a whole one-eighty reversal of mood and eagerly looked to the older man to take up his offer, it wasn't more than another off-beat before the older Cloud called backwards for another of his minions to mind the 'Young Master Mist' on a tour of the stables.

While it was startling to those here she was obviously mothering a Mist to the point of bending to a reasonable whim with the expectation he would help with the upkeep, not quite as much as she expected it to be given the only bare moment of hesitation from someone obviously not diplomatically seasoned as the elder Cloud before the orders were acknowledged. Either it was a known trait of hers, not entirely out of character for older Clouds to mind younger Mists in the minds of Italian Flame users, or their situation wasn't actually a rare if uncommonly seen one.

Moderately fascinating. Sonya kind of wondered if she could get the old Cloud Guardian to confirm it in any way or at least narrow down the possibilities, before being forced to ask outright.

Adelardo turned back to her, a bit more of a darker edge to his genial smirk now as he outright ignored the paperwork that apparently would not be done until she satisfied whatever he wanted.

As the brat was safely on his way out, and they both seemed to find it important that the child was removed from the equation before anything razor sharp or particularly nasty was brought out, the Storm-Cloud wasn't particularly upset nor very concerned by this delay.

"You're Inverted, aren't you?" Sonya started with, much to the man's almost obvious surprise either from speaking first or the suggestion. "A Soft Flame Cloud, as you lot would identify it. Interesting… I've only met one other Cloud like you."

"And this is why they normally shove me out to take care of the horses and civilians rather than deal with other Flame users." Confirmed the Cloud Guardian wryly as he leaned back against the striped upholstery of his armchair, not remotely looking upset she caught on and apparently steered the conversation exactly in the direction the man wanted them to go in. "Rare we might be, but it's known to happen."

She dipped her head to acknowledge that point. "You talk too much."

"Yeah… that's what most of the others say too. But may I point out, you do too?"

"Storm-Cloud." Galina and Sonya might not have been given the run around, this entire situation might've just been manufactured to test her compliance to other Clouds in a higher social position before any formal attempt at a meeting.

Again, interesting. For the implications alone, if not for the situation in general.

"Sure." Dismissed the older Mafioso with a too-easy shrug of scarred arms before he crossed them in front of him loosely. "If that's what you want to blame. Now then, Miss Bazanova… about these gemstones you have."

The professional thief settled in to hear what the older generation of the Cavallone Famiglia wanted in exchange for not jacking up the price to hire or rent a trio of horses comfortable with Flame users. She didn't really need Fiorella's warning that Timoteo and Daniella both had good, or at least in one case only marginally damaged, relations with the Mafia-linked horse race racketeers. It was almost public knowledge the moment you got on the island, what with a specific Vongola-Cavallone only port legally operating in the open on the island's southeastern side.

The fact the previous generation Cavallone Inverted Cloud Guardian knew where the spinal
gemstone hint had come from at all, when Vongola wasn't exactly advertising her as the source of that local tidbit, proved they had a closer than expected link to Lady Vongola's husband… or at least this Cloud was equally as good as Cherep at putting one and one together to make two instead of eleven as most in the mafia might.

(Thursday the 2nd of July, 1970. University of Zürich, Zürich, Swiss Confederation.)

"Now then, Ranier Scarano is it?" Pushing a rather unfortunately thick set of reading glasses higher up the bridge of his nose, the weedy looking man reviewed the associated file closely before arching a somewhat bushy eyebrow at him over it. "Mathematics and if possible philosophy… just an associate's?"

"I was only given so much time to peruse my education." Dismissed the Italian seated across the desk from the man, with perhaps a too toothy grin for the civilian. "Unfortunate, but there it is."

It was only a tad odd, for all the infiltrations and homicide he had done as Renato Sinclair none were quite as interesting as this one would be. There would be no murder here, or at least not intentionally, and with someone as paranoid as he might just be rubbing shoulders with all these civilians in the first allowance of total freedom from childhood… that meant he would need to exhaust himself. Mentally and physically.

As a Sun, he could handle his own physical needs just fine. He had defined and redefined that line more than enough to know how much would be needed. Enough mentally to prevent his boredom from nibbling at his self-control was another problem, hence why he had arranged for college courses. Attempting two associate degrees at the same time might just be enough… if they were all lucky.

The reedy little man sorting out his requested courses blinked once, sniffing thoughtfully. He didn't glance back at the file in his hands, which was a bit of an interesting omission. "Mister Scarano, this is a bit of an unusual situation… but you scored very high on the placement tests for mathematical problem solving. Phenomenally high… although you didn't do nearly as well for your literature arts comprehension."

The prospective student he was half mumbling to didn't blink, and after a second the Mafioso sourly accepted that just maybe he would need at least a 'refresher' course. Teaching himself to the point this one didn't so much as suspect he was self-taught in the subject was fine. Not perfect, but fine.

He very carefully didn't grind his teeth together as he accepted the personal failure when the older man finally wandered back to a point.

"The philosophy course would contain more than enough writing and reading exercises to knock off the rust, of course. So many don't bother to use what they learn so the skills fall to disuse…" Another of those thoughtful sniffs, although this one was just judgmental enough to stick under the skin, and the thin admission officer allowed the file on him to softly slap closed on his desk. "…however."

"…ho?"

"I would like to be your freshman academic advisor, if I may. It's not usually done, but I see a need here." After tapping his fingers on the closed file, one Garron Oppliger leaned forward and set his
crossed arms on the top of his desk just to match his glare with the Italian hitman's gaze sitting before him. "You have made clear you only have a limited time with us. Mister Scarano, with a mind like yours it would be a crime to limit you to the introductory classes for a simple associate degree. I foresee you testing out of at least most, if not nearly all of them, within a month of the start of the semester."

A bit nonplussed at this strange turn of the conversation, he thoughtfully studied the older man wondering just what his aim was. The expected being stated didn't really affect him, because he had intended to do just that and anyone that looked over his test scores and saw the same was just natural.

"You'll be in and out of here rather often until you catch up to where your talents with mathematics are. Instead of some senior bumbling about and wasting your limited time, I will speak with the professors once you test out of their classes to hopefully catch you up to where you should be as quickly as possible. I intend to see you leave here next year with your bachelor's degree in mathematics, perhaps mostly on the way to a master's with whatever occasional effort you can spare in the few years after."

Admittedly, the Sun was very tempted by the idea of excelling. Very tempted. The only sour tone in the whole topic was just what the other would be getting for the very simple sounding aid.

Then again, the man was a civilian. Who was in the profession of helping students seeking further education. "Limitations?"

"Your progress will be limited by your academic behavior. You slack off showing your obvious understanding of the mathematics course, I will withdraw my aid. You start failing your philosophy classes, or any other class for that matter, I will no longer help you skip out of any classes too basic for you. You get arrested for so much as drunken behavior while in public, I will pass you off to one of those brats likely your age but nearly done with their time here."

Slightly watery hazel eyes behind those coke-bottle glasses peered at him severely, and another of those thoughtful sniffs sounded. "Do we have a gentleman's agreement, Mister Scarano?"

…but what did he get out of doing this?

Stumped on that particular and likely overly suspicious question, and still unwilling to remove the rosary he had an Austrian Mist place the same restrictions Sonya's Mists put on her castle so he wouldn't catch everyone's thoughts in a five meter radius even if then he'd know for sure, the hitman reluctantly nodded. "I... don't see any particular reason why not. Agreed."

He could always search it out later, when the offer might not be withdrawn from him.

This time there was a judgmental sniff of disapproval. Not aimed at the confused Mafioso's person, but apparently still something to do with him given the older man muttered disparaging things about his former instructors under his breath. The closet-like office was quiet enough he caught them anyways, and finally the civilian pulled a whole packet of information from one desk drawer and started marking it up for him.

"I will speak with some of the professors about arranging for you to test out of their courses before classes even start. It is entirely dependent on them if they offer, and if so you will treat them with the respect and dignity they deserve for allowing it. If they do. That should save you, and I, some time."

A dorm assignment, book lists for those on the course for associate degrees in his picks, and what seemed to be a list of rules and regulations for students were shoved across the desk for him. Before the confused hitman could even reach over to take them his very likely soon to be changed class schedule was slapped down on top of them. "If you join a club for the time being, until I can get you into the proper classes, ensure you have the agreement that you may drop out beforehand as soon as
your coursework starts becoming a challenge. I'd rather not get into a shouting match with one of the coaches, please."

Cautiously, he collected the information he would need in two months and glanced over at least the basics.

"Now then, as you advisor, there are a few summer course lectures and projects you might need to fully flesh out your academic records for those degrees." Continued Oppliger briskly, pulling a different slim binder from the cluttered rack of them behind his chair without even looking. "How do you feel about psychology?"

Like reverse psychology?

"I've some passing knowledge."

The reedy little man inspected him closely for that non-answer. "Any objections to a crash course? It will count towards your needed credits in a philosophy minor if you do well."

"That actually sounds delightful." It wasn't as if he had much else to do right now, and it would provide him a convenient excuse to do a little research into his 'academic advisor' on the side. If he liked the information taught or not was immaterial, it was information and all information was useable somehow as long as one was decently inventive. He accepted the new packet, sealed interestingly, that seemed to correspond to the suggested lesson. "Anything else available?"

"Not a whole lot that will count." Grumbled the older man distastefully, running a finger down an apparent list of subjects and then cross referencing it to another column of information also listed side by side for that purpose. "EMT training?"

"I have no objection."

"Good. A better idea than you joining one of the sports clubs. Then I won't get one of the coaches after my ass for heaping more and better coursework on you during the semester." The file handed over wasn't a packet, but a handbook. Highly pleased with that kind of forethought from a set of his likely future instructors, the Sun slipped it into the pile growing on his lap of paperwork. "Any particular desire of your own, or should I keep on suggesting anything that might help?"

"I do have a side interest in health, but I am not doctor material." Nor nurse, he just didn't have the mentality for the work. "Any possible business courses would not be particularly objectionable either."

"We have several medical courses although those students have clogged up what is available, nearly instantly once the courses are arranged. I'll keep an eye out for last minute drop outs, but I promise nothing. Business is more likely. Language workshops?"

"Is Chinese available?" Inquired the hitman curiously.

"Mandarin, Cantonese, Min, Wu, or Hakka?"

…fuck. "Whichever is more common?"

"Mandarin? Or Cantonese?"

Dear God, really?

"Mandarin, I suppose." Even if what was handed over looked more like a dictionary than a
workbook or field guide, he just tossed it into the rather quickly growing pile without another look. "Why five?"

"Why not five, apparently. Those are just the 'major' ones, as well." Groused the thin older man without looking up at him. "Most of the other languages seem to be already listed down as ones you know… there's a workshop available for Global Business Practices."

"Acceptable." This one was a simple set of pages stapled together, but the Mafioso didn't much mind. "There's… no, that would conflict with the workshop… that would conflict with the EMT training schedule… Supply Chain Dynamics, Mister Scarano? It might be the last summer break course you will have time for attending."

Gingerly accepting the next packet of information, he gave him a rather suspicious look. "Can I ask the reasoning you've made these available for me?"

"The more you do now, before classes start, the less other coursework for credits you need to flesh out your degrees. Meaning I can then cram you into better classes for a master's during this upcoming and next semester." Those watery hazel eyes didn't seem so weak when the man glanced up again, arching an eyebrow fairly challengingly at the Italian. "Why? Do you think you can't do it?"

"…I didn't say that."

"Then you'd better get to work. That EMT training course starts Monday and you should go register now before office hours close. Deadline for acceptance is today." Oppliger informed him pointedly, making a show of leisurely leafing through the binder he had open. "And then, almost immediately after you finish training, you start the Mandarin Chinese workshop with a few evenings of that introduction to psychology class. Also, if I can point out, you already promised me to maintain acceptable or better grades in your courses in exchange for my assistance in skipping the introductory classes for mathematics? Get good grades, Mister Scarano… and I'll be sure to cram every other waking moment with a class to get you that master's degree within a year, or at least as close as I can legitimately arrange."

He glanced down at that handbook, cursed vilely in Italian once he realized there was about three hours to find and be accepted for the first 'extra' lesson he had accepted, and bolted to his feet to go get it in exchange for keeping the possibility of excelling open for him. "You, Mister Oppliger, are a slave driver."

"I am." Agreed the fucking civilian blandly, rather pleased with the rather negative observation on his nature. "But, I will make your limited time here count. Hopefully, it won't kill you. I'll send you notice when I've arrange for you to test out of certain classes and if there are any other credits I can have you acquire outside of the semester, so do try to get at least a few hours of sleep in your dorm per night."

Shooting the smug man a half-hearted glare, and still kind of suspicious over why the hell he was going to attempt to 'kill' him through helping, the hitman shot off to find the first of his summer practical courses. Now the option was available, he kind of really wanted that help to skip the drudgery and get into more interesting classes right away.

Because he was entirely honest in only having a limited time, and the civilian was actually helping him make the best of it, he'd allow this kind of assumptive behavior. If Oppliger was going to drown him in scholastic work, then the Sun's normally restless behavior would be neatly contained on that end and he'd have more than enough access to learn what motivated the man to offer to be his
academic advisor' one way or another.

It just left him with the problem of studying at the same time he worked out, but that was always going to be an issue to figure out in the moment than beforehand.

(Saturday the 11th of July, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Provence of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Tyr took the interesting porcelain cup, glazed white on the inside but set in brass metal from rim to base, filled with slightly amateur made espresso. "I will admit I was leery of returning until you decided to show in some way you were open to visitors."

The cup in his hands was one of four, there were three others and only one was filled with black tea. Untouched for more than a little while by appearances, given the bumblebee perched on an edge and investigating the liquid without immediately flying off due to the heat it apparently lost some time ago.

"It wasn't… well, the second time, it wasn't you I was annoyed with." Sonya informed him pointedly, accepting a drool covered ball and tossing it dismissively over a shoulder for the pups she had been minding before his arrival to chase after. "I think we just need to avoid Don Vongola as a subject, and we'll be fine."

"Hmm… well, more to the point, I seem to owe you the attentions of one Esper called Viper. Their information is more than acceptable, my thanks."

She did not react with anything positive, but she tellingly didn't frown either as she glanced sideways at him.

"Why did you aim that one at me?"

"If Viper's in country, then there's this little Misty boogeyman that can and might become interested. I want to kill that thing however I can catch it." When he paused to give the woman a particularly intent look, she made a rather uncomfortable huff and ignored the young dogs aiming to play fetch with her scrambling back to her boots. "Viper won't speak on the subject to me here, just calling it 'suicidal'. Mrs. Silvery-white's aware this is possibly an issue, and I've asked D'Attilio about it. None seem to honestly realize that enough young Mists believing in one thing can Construct it against any specific Will and dismiss the very idea out of hand until I point out otherwise."

Pausing, the Sword Emperor reviewed his own feelings on the subject intently for a full moment. Taking a fortifying drink of the coffee in his hands, the master assassin set the cup down firmly as he isolated his thoughts on the matter and not what was apparently unquestioningly assumed. "Will you keep them appraised?"

"Interestingly, although I spoke to both last month about the subject… they have very tellingly either forgotten or become too overwhelmed with their usual duties to report back anything they might've learned or what I asked."

The stress the thief put on 'forgotten' was entirely too obvious, but it was rather apparent her patience on the subject was starting to become strained.

"A month might be rather short notice to find anything substantiated. I normally wait three for
enough information on targets to be assembled." Pointed out the Mafioso carefully, indicating it was neither a defense nor him excusing tardiness with a gesture of an open hand. "Although Lady Superbi once was a spy, she has become rather more high profile than usual due to recent events and needs to move more cautiously than before. Asking a teacher an inquiry over the summer months might usually mean they have more than enough time to investigate and answer, however Mafia School's Instructors are often loaned out to certain famiglias over the summer months for students not sent to the physical school itself for various reasons. If you are asking for more than more rumor and hearsay, they would need more time."

A harsh snort was his first answer, but then she accepted the ball the darker of the two young animals was trying to give her to toss out across her back courtyard yet again. "I'll keep it in mind."

Nilda Superbi would be his next stop, apparently. Tyr would like to be kept aware of her hunt, if only to pull his agents sniffing around a Cloud's target before they died due to incompetence or attempting to steal a kill from her.

He refreshed his cup of coffee. "If I may be so impertinent without risking your ire again, where is your chef?"

It was more professional curiosity than polite, however losing track of an assassin was never a good idea.

Instead of responding in any way expected, Sonya slid back on the stone bench she was perched upon and gave him another of those sideways looks. "I've asked you to come for a reason."

"...oh?"

"Cesare went off, likely to investigate... Renato's death." Uncomfortable with the subject matter she brought up herself, she rolled both shoulders and looked away from him for a moment. "That was a few weeks ago, he only asked for a few days. As I do not actually have a good estimation of Cesare's skills in killing, I am... concerned."

"Are you asking me to look for him?"

"No, how much to bribe you to look after this territory for a few days so I may look for my wayward chef?" When she turned back to him, there were only flecks of color in normally slate grey eyes. "It has been a little while... most have now relaxed their guard. I have an excuse."

Sonya taking the pains to deliberately wait out everyone's expectations before exercising whatever murderous inclination the death of her favored Mafioso caused her was surprisingly sensible. More so than the apparent immediate depression and quite confirmation that she knew when Lady Fiorella finally admitted to her what the Vongola Alliance knew of her hitman's fate.

He himself had not fallen into the trap of expecting her near-immediate rage lashing out at everyone nearby once she knew, but he had been a bit unavoidably busy to spare the ladies so much hassle when the news broke. Even if this was her merely putting it off for another day and a believable excuse, Tyr was still somewhat impressed with her self-restraint.

Time would tell in the end.

"Out of mere curiosity, if I refuse would you go anyways?"

"...Renato... and I, dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to ensure Shamal had something resembling a childhood. Ensuring the time he spent on our godchild was worth it is still more important to me than anyone else right now." She confessed to him slowly, extending a hand
down to receive the small rubber ball from the pale puppy this time. "Even if Cesare is one of few remaining links I can preserve for the brat if he becomes curious over the history of his godfather."

Instead of throwing the dog toy behind her, she tossed it past Tyr's form to bounce off her garage and down the passage beneath the covered walkway leading from it to her residence. The young canines, after a false start the way they expected her to throw their ball, tore off after it almost over one another.

"I see." Her offer was probably the closest thing he'd get to a vacation for the next few years, moving his interests to a new property and keeping his Varia squads viable would eat into any amount of personal time he would normally have left over just as soon as he had the land deed.

At the very least, he could speak at length with Daniella about recent events he might've missed due to his extensive traveling needs right now.

"...Fiorella's going to go back to Don Vongola before school starts for her older sons." Sonya informed him blandly, stretching out both legs and leaning back to eye the sky curiously. "She's putting it off for another few weeks, so I can teach her to disarm someone at close range and only once she's solid with her ballet routine to practice on her own, but you are about to get a significant amount of time back. Just don't tell him yet, and she won't be annoyed with either of us."

The Sword Emperor drank his coffee instead of allowing the smirk trying to creep across his face to show.

Lady Fiorella would apparently wait only just long enough for her absence to become a bit painfully obvious to the rest of the Vongola Alliance, but before it would be remotely acceptable for any to ask Timoteo why she was elsewhere. He was particularly fond of her priorities heeding the needs of their children, and general excuse to fabricate a defense of if needed, to use. If it was against her sensibilities or not would remain to be seen, but he could appreciate a well deliberated maneuver to make another cringe just fine off the apparent.

Reminded him just a little of Daniella snubbing a detractor, merely in a less violently painful way.

"Then I foresee no reason why I cannot remain in place just long enough for you to find your chef, Sonya."

She gave him a very pointed look. "Hire, Tyr. I do not have the time to be trading favors right now."

"I will discuss the appropriate terms and dates with your Lackey." Unfortunate, but he could relate very easily.

Anything further was prevented by a child's gleeful cry and a spat of barking, then the paler pup raced back to the woman with the ball in his jaws without his darker companion. Sonya rose to her feet instead of waiting for the animal to give her the toy and moved off before she thought to say something. "My godson is apparently back from his lessons, excuse me."

"Of course."

"...oh, and don't let any of your agents wander the castle grounds after dark. I'm not sure if the Mirror Lady will keep her pet from hunting them, and frankly don't care either."

He nodded simply even if he was now alone in the back courtyard of her castle's grounds, taking the off-hand warning to mean while she was open to his presence in her territory she would not be providing shelter. Nor amending existing security arrangements to account for him temporarily.
The assassin wouldn't either in her place.

(Friday the 17th of July, 1970. Venice, Italian Republic.)

"\textit{You said 'a few days', Cesare. Not a damn month.}" 

"Slight \textit{complication.}" Inviting the thief inside his safe house, how she found it could wait for a few hours at least because she was due some consideration for the time he had already wasted when she requested he remain somewhere else. "Ah… I suppose I should ask if anyone informed you…?"

"\textit{Renato’s missing, presumed dead.}" The Lovely Bossy Dragoness tossed him a \textit{vicious} glare over her gently smoking pipe when he went to open his mouth and regretfully change that.

"…\textit{there is no body.}" Allowed the assassin slowly as he turned back to the work he had been just finishing up, unsure if he should press the issue right this moment or not. "\textit{His last known position burned down to a ruined husk and killed several handfuls of people. With a fair number of them being rather objectionable morons attempting to inconvenience him for several years now."}

"And?"

"And… \textit{his fedora survived whatever happened. Somehow intact. Curious, but not out of the question.}" He flicked his wrist at the corkboard he picked up for his little self-imposed investigation, which held most of the information he had pieced together since that night and what those around here were up to in relation. "\textit{Someone picked it up, out of a police evidence impound before any reports of what little evidence there is left was made to the general public, as a trophy from what I’ve found.}"

All the rats that inhabited this little bolt-hole suddenly fled, to the last little furry beast. Something prickled up his spine in warning, and that something was centered on the very still woman staring at him blankly as he turned to see what was going on.

…no, not blankly. \textit{Expectantly}. Like a cat might watch a mouse they were playing with for if its prey would do anything interesting, although he did not remotely appreciate the allegory his mind jumped to.

He did not have a \textit{great} amount of experience with Dying Will Flame users. The most often one he associated with had been Renato himself, and then more recently with her very eclectic collection of users all sharing space and getting into little spats as they settled in their own little niches.

A Sun feeling murderous would generally make everyone around him feel a bit murderous as well. Apparently, that also meant if a Sun was feeling good they could make everyone around them feel that as well. Tatiana was certainly more cheerful than that asshole of a hitman ever felt like being, unless a former lover was intent on upsetting the delightful nurse.

He could not for sure say this was a \textit{‘Cloudy’ ability}, making him so uneasy in spite of himself and without any physical reason for \textit{why}. It could be a \textit{‘Stormy’ ability}. Either way it was new, and he was very cautious about what it actually meant. He learned the other tidbit through hard experience and then a surprising recent twist, jumping to conclusions on too few details was always poor form.

"\textit{This is Venice, the home ground of the Mancini famiglia.}" Observed the thief slowly and with a deliberate manner, still watching him uncomfortably closely as she pulled the burnt-out pipe from between her lips.
"One syndicate cannot reach everywhere, even in a city like this one." Cesare refuted carefully and
more than a little warily, glancing from the encoded letter in his hands to the corkboard again before
turning back to her. "No, not them. Just outside of them, there is this little group of thug-types among
the 'usual' bottom feeders larger mafia families tend to attract. Their, for the lack of a better word,
leader was the one to take it. A false name and disguise took up a few days of hunting, but I am
merely a Mafioso… Lovely Bossy Dragoness. Planning around the Mancini and their orbiting
groups took longer than I foresaw, and I did not expect anyone to be that foolish when I asked you
for time."

There was a slow blink and then she offered him a smile that the mildly murderous chef would not
like aimed at him anymore. "Would you like an extra set of hands?"

…there weren't really many of them he could count on for assured assistance left, and of the bare
handful there was yet another death taking their more well-traveled associate. Additionally, Renato
had been very comfortable with the little lady thief at his side and this was not the first time she had
snuck up on his general location.

"Shamal gave him that hat." Sonya simply offered in explanation while he thought about the offer.

…ouch, Cesare's poor and tiny heart twanged. "How is the little bambino?"

"He's the one that's been insisting on the 'disappeared, not dead' explanation. Refuses to hear
otherwise."

"Renato was always a vindictive bastard." He confessed wearily as he set down the paper, pulling
an already tied bandana from his slack's back pocket and pulling it on to at least hide his hair color
until he chose to murder someone and covering his face was more important. "If he was… merely
missing he would've already come back and buried the idiot who thought he could take something
from him, even if he had to go back immediately into whichever bolt hole. Especially if it came from
someone he considered his. If he was just lying low, it wouldn't be here to be found. I had the same
hope at first when it was taken…"

His boss' jaw worked silently for a moment, but she uncomfortably shrugged and looked away from
him. "It could be a trap."

"Even that would not put off the rascallion."

"It could be a trap for you."

Cesare grinned humorlessly, earning a faintly challenging blonde eyebrow raise when she turned
back to him. "Then I look forward to it."

She eyed him thoughtfully for a long moment. "You realize I will be blamed… right?"

"Come now-"

"Cesare, it's a Flame-thing. I'm the Cloud, we're all expected to be murderously violent. No one will
believe you 'kill-stealed' from me. Even if I left this moment and went home, they'll still blame me."
Under a faintly confused stare, she lifted a shoulder helplessly. "I can kill, I just don't like doing it.
And I had to arrange with Tyr to watch the castle grounds for me in order to feel alright leaving the
brat at home, then put off the lessons I'm supposed to be giving Fiorella to my sister, it's known I'm
out and about."

"…why tell me this now?"
"Because, I… don't like killing. However, if you go a little overboard… with preferably some nice property damage to boot, that will be attributed to the amount of damage going after Shamal will incur from me if they try. I can almost guarantee you that you won't be able to match what I can dish out, but… in a way, as I'm expected to…?"

Cesare worked through that slightly confusing admission of expectations and associations silently for a few seconds, silently checking he had his knives secured in place. "…oh. Oh ho. That... yes. I can use that."

A death here or there was never too uncommon, and while it would be investigated it was more likely only one death would be too little to have anything done to him in revenge for getting his own. He glanced over to the corkboard he had to submerge into the waters of the Grand Canal before leaving, to destroy the work he had done the last month figuring out if anyone else had put his fellow 'not' friend in the position he found himself in to choose to do what he had.

With Sonya's permission to use her likely undeserved reputation to conceal his work, Cesare could probably cull the entire rotten group and their paymaster instead of just the trophy taker. He was not sure how far any particular grudge against Renato stretched back here beyond them, but it was likely he could make it apparent that he knew it did to a point with just a little more help from the lady thief.

How they reacted to it in the coming days would be very telling, and something to watch.

Then, agreeably enough, there would still be his own 'revenge' to come back and do. Perhaps this fall, when she would be less disgruntled at an emergency assassination job taking up the months she asked him to set aside.

"You have no objections to my 'kill-stealing' from you?" He inquired only once, satisfied he would not be torn between choosing to avenge the hitman and making it abundantly apparent there were consequences to targeting the remnants of their little group.

"It's only 'stealing' if I want to do it myself." Admitted the Lovely Bossy Dragoness, disassembling her pipe to tuck away into her form fitting jeans. "Renato... removed those I might've wanted to. No one left had a hand in it, so I don't feel particularly homicidal towards anyone. I've dealt with my feelings on the matter, I don't need any more 'Cloud therapy'."

"Really?"

"You recall Fong from the morning you left, right? He's always willing to fight with me, and it made for a few very liberating days working through what I felt while attempting to take his head off. Again." There was the barest hint of a pout for barely a blink. "Pretty much the only time he's ever useful to have around, really."

Cesare nodded absently, he didn't particularly know much about Miss Mingxia's brother so anything she spoke on the topic was just new information for him, taking a few bits of key evidence from the board before letting it slip into the water seeping up from the broken floorboards into the basement of this house. "How do we ensure everyone looks to you for tonight?"

He didn't need the corkboard for another job later, and there wasn't a reason to 'rinse' the paper to be reused anymore. Being financially able to go out and buy the damn implements of researching a target was a blessing, truly.

"I'll take Renato's hat back to the brat, everyone else will trip over themselves to draw conclusions. Your inclusion might be questioned but you can say nothing, and they'll fill in the blanks with their own horror story." Rolling her grey eyes in exasperation, she accepted the bits of paper he needed to
follow up on at a later date with only a short frown before tucking them into her pocket as well. "Do you need my help?"

"If you have a moral objection to murder such as I'm planning, Lovely Bossy Dragoness, I can handle things just fine myself." Promised the assassin simply, dismissing the concern as he didn't quite need the level of stealth he was unsure about doing anymore and could cover his involvement most easily with a little bit of arson as well. "I appreciate you easing the way, however it will annoy you."

"Have fun." Drawled the Storm-Cloud agreeably, eyeing the staircase leading higher in this obviously sealed off basement level of the building curiously. "I'll be nearby when you're done."

"One last thing, just before you go," insisted her likely most murderous employee as he checked everything remotely incriminating was either already sinking to the bottom of the canal or on their very persons, "any calling cards I can use for a 'warning'?"

"...I piked a few heads on random things occasionally." She admitted to thoughtfully.

If that wasn't utterly perfect for Cesare's needs he wouldn't know what else could be better... but then she continued.

"If there's someone you know for a fact targeted Renato, take his head with you. I'll turn it into another soup bowl."

"I love the way you think, Lovely Bossy Dragoness." Messy, and oh so macabre.

He hoped he would be the one to serve their borscht in it once she felt the need to pull out the set.

(Sunday the 19th of July, 1970. Las Vegas, Nevada, United States of America.)

Skull very pointedly held the receiver far away from his ear as physically possible until Sonya stopped trying to belt out 'Happy Birthday' for their older sister. He rolled his eyes at Mauricio's absolutely flabbergasted expression as the Rain stared at the innocent bundle of plastics and electronics emitting the tortured lyrics dubiously.

"...Nya, I swear to whatever the hell it is you look to in a time of crisis, you need to stop singing."

"Says you."

"You're tone deaf. Stop singing!"

"Ladies." He insisted strongly before they started squabbling and forgot he was listening in, gingerly putting the receiver back to his ear so he could hear any replies without straining himself. "I love you both. Happy birthday, Tats. Nya, I kind of agree with her."

"Of course you do, it's her birthday." Dismissed the younger sister evilly, which probably meant she had absolutely no plans on stopping like they repeatedly kept asking her.

"This is all your fault." Tatiana hissed down the line.

Which, yeah. It totally was. "I didn't think she couldn't sing when I asked her at the time!"

"Bullshit, I can sing just fine." Sonya insisted yet again on their end of the line. "Now then, you failed
Rubbing his face with his other hand not holding a phone, Skull had to laugh just a little bit. Flapping a hand at his hype man to show it was safe to try and go to sleep now, the Inverted Cloud turned and stretched out on his hotel bed for the opportunity to speak with his sisters. Chipping in absentely now and again as they went over the now traditional fight about if Sonya should sing for them yet again.

It had been a bit of childish foolishness, asking her to do something special for him personally one birthday instead of giving him a gift or take him somewhere. She did start the trend of mostly handcrafting the things she sent him for his birthday and Christmas presents, but short notice and with the idea to foist him off at a carnival so she could read in peace later that night suddenly 'not good enough' the thief had made her very pointed revenge on the spot.

Tatiana hadn't believed it when he announced a warning, so their little sister proved to the entire family that no. Sonya could not carry a tune.

Arseniy had just about burst something laughing his head off, and Lisa had very painfully asked if the youngest would like lessons. However it was their older sister who made the critical error, demanding the younger thief never sing again.

Cherep had compounded it, saying her singing should count as a negative gift.

Admittedly this was slightly after their very first trip to Mafia Land, when their sister had so horribly mistreated her book. Which meant his prickly fellow Cloud was not feeling very generous, nor forgiving.

Now every birthday she ensured the both of them were either there or listening and attempted to sing 'Happy Birthday' in whatever language the country they were in spoke at them both. Pointedly. Badly.

Skull was just lucky Master Liam and the Großes Volksfest was near enough or in winter lodgings both times his little sister attempted to serenade him with the now-traditional song to sing on his birthday.

"-and you're a brat." Tatiana gave up with finally, huffing.

"Mmhmm. Hey, Cherep? Where are you now?"

"Las Vegas. It's very… illuminated out here."

"You're in the City of Sin, and all you can comment on is the pretty neon lights?" Questioned their little sister dubiously, huffing a little which meant either she was annoyed or Tatiana jabbed her in the ribs in revenge for something. "No gambling addition to report? No pretty showgirl you might run away with?"

"Yeah… no." He gambled with himself more than enough as it was to feel anything but dubious himself over gambling with his money. "And we were the show this weekend, baby sis."

"It's Las Vegas. Cherep, the city probably won't sleep until just before noon."

"Who cares about Las Vegas? Where are you going next?" Apparently Tatiana was in possession of the phone on their end, or at least she was now.

"The Americas are almost done. We got a couple Mexican and South America stops before we jump the ocean."
"Are you going through China?" Sonya interjected a lot more seriously than before.

"Still in negotiations, but looks to be a no. We'll go south instead, more likely, and see Australia." He hummed lowly, glancing over at the Rain attempting to be inconspicuous and give him privacy for the call. "Think we're also skipping a good portion of Africa, due to the ongoing conflict over there."

His little sister returned the absent hum but didn't comment either way.

There was about twenty or so more stops for the world tour. What might make it a whole lot more interesting was that Siegfried and Roy might not be going the whole way as planned.

The magicians and lion tamers were very tempted with some of the offers a few of the casinos were courting them with, some with the offer of recouping the early termination fees their current patron would levy if the duo took any up on the offers. Roy informed him they were maybe thinking about settling down in the desert city just for the temperature jokingly when they arrived, and that had been without temptation heaped on top. There would probably be a more concentrated attempt later today before their next showing here, and not just with the talent scouts attending their first day's performances to get the jump on one another.

"I should still be there just after the start of next year, Nya."

"Your world tour doesn't include Italy?"

"It's a year, not three." He reminded both of them a little wryly, eyeing the hotel's ceiling a bit curiously while wondering how they put the splattered-glop texture up there. "We can't hit up everywhere... just enough time to circle the globe in a kind of straight line, and if they did take us through Italy or France my plans for right after would be shot."

It would suck to lose the lion tamers, Skull wasn't sure if they could pull just as much interest with the other acts. Probably lucking into a 'mainline' show himself or not, if they did leave and it defaulted to who else had a year-long contract, he honestly couldn't say if he wanted them to try their luck here or keep on traveling with the show. He had a couple ideas to pull out if the German guys left, but they were kind of untested and probably not something to suddenly risk mid-tour between all the traveling and set up.

Diana already had a few dents from minor accidents, not show stopping bad ones thankfully. He started risking more than momentum and maybe unstable props and his moniker of 'the Immortal' might get more substantiated than he'd like than just attributed to his willingness to risk his life.

"-ep. Cherep."

"...ah... oops? Daydreaming."

"Go to sleep, you dork."

"Hey, Tats. Not nice. I made specific sure I'd call just after lunch on your birthday, and this is how you treat me? I'm so hurt. You can't see it, but I'm pouting."

"It is a bit after one here, which means it should be about four in the morning for you." She countered dryly, and he could almost see the finger wagging she was probably subjecting a mildly annoyed Sonya to in lieu of him. "And just after a show, too. Get some rest, Cherep, and thank you."

"Sure, sis. Give Nya a hug from me so she's forced to give you one too."
The redhead laughed, even from the sounds of it the blonde had scampered off to avoid such a thing. "Nice idea. Pity she was right there to hear you."

"The chase makes it more fun." He countered, snorting when she hung up on him. Likely in hopes of making him go to sleep like she ordered.
Chapter 20

(Tuesday the 21st of July, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Vigorously rubbing her now shoulder-length ash blonde hair as dry as it would get with a towel, Sonya left the terry cloth draped around her shoulders to catch the inevitable drips and exited her bathroom. "Alright, pup. Time for bed."

Alek completely ignored her, pacing around the foot of her bed to stay as far away from the probably strong-scented thick cream lotion Tatiana was smoothing into her skin. He couldn't quite ignore her seizing him by the scruff of his neck, and the puppy whined resignedly as she dropped him to the floor.

Her sister snickered, even if this was not the first time the canine tried to pull this kind of shit. Working rather intently on a patch of skin behind her right shoulder, the redhead nudged the tub of skin cream over the bedspread with her toes. "Aww... but momma... he was being good puppy and not making a mess."

"I really don't have faith he can hold it the entire night just yet." Mainly by being the one to clean up after him before her sister took a morning shower, which meant she knew where the pup was in development milestones. "The minute he can for more than a rare night, then he can escape the bathroom."

Taking the offered container and positioning it so she could reach into it easily, she scooped a generous amount to smooth into her legs first. She'd pen in the dog in a bit, but neither of them really intended to sleep just yet and that would only needlessly torture the nearly two-month-and-some-change-old puppy with tantalizing images of being excluded from whatever the sisters were doing.

A fate worse than death, given how he whined so pitifully every time they stayed up a bit later than when he got shut up for the night.

Besides which, the thief already had to replace that door between her bedroom and bathroom. Alek was not a fan of the whole being separated from them in the night no matter what reasoning there was to be had. Shamal had kept on sitting with Marco, but at least the boy left once his puppy fell asleep now, so there was less damage on his side of the castle.

Her pale and dappled furred puppy then proved he was a growing boy by being able to successfully jump back up to her bedspread without bouncing off the edge, even if he stretched up on his hind paws he really shouldn't have been able to reach the top of the blankets with his little black nose and it didn't seem like he was ready for that kind of mischief.

Tatiana burst into a gleeful laugh, which made her dog rather damn pleased with himself if the wagging of his tail was any judge. Bounding over to the woman, Alek cautiously sniffed her a few times to see if the probably strong-smelling lotion was fading from her yet or not before flopping out between where the two of them started the night out at and giving them both a pleased with himself doggy grin.

"Me thinks your puppy has spoken."

"My puppy has no idea if his bladder will last enough to weigh in on this conversation. Or do you
want to volunteer to clean the bed every morning as well as take a slightly later shower?"

"Uh... no. You have other bathrooms, I'll just go down the hall a bit." Sniffing in mock insult, the nurse rolled over onto her stomach just to reach over and pet animal fur.

Alek was not a fan of that idea and batted an oversized paw over her hand to pin it to the fabric. Then he had the brass balls to pretend utter innocence of everything while gently batting his tail about, even while keeping the so offensive appendage pinned down.

Sonya was slightly jealous, he could pull it off so much better than she could.

Snickering, her sister then enticed him into a rousing game of 'nip me before I pet you', which would do her bathroom door no favors when the overly excited animal was shut up for the night. Ignoring the two of them, she got on with the business of conditioning her skin so it wouldn't dry out and get itchy tomorrow in this kind of near-tropical heat.

Shamal letting himself into her bedroom wasn't exactly surprising, given the events of the last couple days. He still had Renato's hat on his head, and a double armful of his own puppy, as he pouted at them all in an honestly mopey way. "Mamma? Can I sleep with you and zia tonight?"

"Of course you can, bambino." Tatiana soothed before she could glance over to silently ask the same thing, immediately untangling herself from one puppy and opening her arms for him. "We don't mind."

Finishing up with the underside of her left arm, the thief smoothed the excess lotion into her hands before nipping the tub of skin cream off the bedspread. Marco could and would dive nose first into something probably not fit for puppy consumption without care, even if Alek found it too strong for him to bother even sniffing near. "If you did, I have quite a few open bedrooms you could kip out in tonight."

"Ha, ha." Tossed back her sister flatly, hauling her nephew bodily into the spot where her dog was attempting to innocently feign nonchalance and earn through being a forgotten good boy. The canines greeted each other with what was becoming customary, which was a playfight. "What seems to be the problem, short stack?"

"I'll grow." Insisted the boy stubbornly, examining the tussling dogs getting very close to the edge of the bedspread instead of looking at either woman. "And there's no real reason, zia. I just thought you two might like company tonight."

Claiming that while still wearing his 'technically missing' godfather's hat was not remotely convincing to either of them. Tatiana summoned up a slightly dim smile for him and patted the space between the sisters. "Sure, kid. Tuck yourself in, we were just about to turn the lights off."

Since he had been really fucking good about sleeping in his own bed and not hers this summer, which might have more to do with the fact his bed right now was shaped like a boat and he thought it 'cool beans' than because he wasn't interested in hers anymore, Sonya didn't mind.

Honesty, she rather liked sleeping with others to the point of not mentioning to her sister she could get her own bed now that most of the construction in the front acre was done and so many others moved out of the castle proper.

She did steal the mass of abused felt off her brat's head to hang on her side of the headboard for safe keeping, then got up to corral the dogs.

A few moments too late, Alek knocked Marco back and off the foot of the bed with a rather amusing
shocked yelp from the both of them. Her dog looked *utterly* disgusted with *everything* as she picked him up, the brat's puppy looked innocently curious of what was going on when he got lifted off his paws next, and Shamal at least had a more real smirk on his face as she unceremoniously left them both in the bathroom.

(Thursday the 23rd of July, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Sonya hesitated, feeling a bit weird about just letting herself into this room even if she technically owned it and the rest of the caste entirely, and eventually just rapped her knuckles on the wood after she couldn't think of another reason to put this off other than 'because'.

"Enter." Verde snapped distractedly, more a demand than anything else muffled by the door.

Shamal tossed her a slightly disgruntled look over a shoulder when he checked to see who it was, turning back to his dismal number of remaining pieces of his Mist-chess game in short order after acknowledging her presence. "Hey, mamma. *Did you need us for anything?"*

It was practically the only thing not in the small set of boxes, but she wasn't here to see the state of her soon to be sewing room once the scientist cleared out to his place. "I have something different for you both, yes. Anywhere close to done here?"

"…no." Groused her godson mulishly, glowering down at the warped chess table where his dog-fish pieces were trying to fend off some kind of eagle-lion hybrids on the octagon-patterned 'cliffs'. "*We're going to go until I finally win."

Verde cocked an eyebrow without looking up from his contemplations of the Mist-warped game table, somehow oozing sardonic amusement from every conservative non-movement, tapping a forefinger on one of his pieces and a position on the game board for it to move to.

Which pretty much finished pinning in all of Shamal's, if she was even reading the setup right.

"Right… *brat, I need a word kind of tonight and not later.*" He didn't seem too bothered, glancing up at her distractedly while letting the game board go in a puff of glittering indigo Flames and resetting it for a new go. "*The maids are here to clean the common areas, not your room."

The young Mist suddenly went brick red, turning his little body halfway around and balefully glowering up at her. "Mamma…"

"*Seriously, you need to clean your room. The floors getting swept and mopped, and the window, as well as the laundry are all fine to leave to them… but if you leave your things and Luigi's cage litter all over the place Marco might end up eating something that isn't good for puppies."

Upon hearing his name, a wet black nose poked out from under the suddenly normal chess board table and quivered. The puppy then slithered off the boy's lap and *whoomphed* to the floor just to scramble over and paw at her ankles happily to beg for pets.

Of course, the thump from his littermate hitting the floor in an ungainly pile attracted her own puppy's attention. Who immediately forgot she ordered him to stay outside the door and Alek bodily barreled into the darker furred dog, gleefully instigating a puppy fight now there was something to contend with each other for.

Verde sighed noisily, amusingly not even a blip on either dogs' radar, as he glowered down at the
additional animal invading his temporary refuge to mess about. "Is this that important?"

"I'd greatly rather nip this before it gets too out of hand." Sonya reached out and tugged on Shamal's hair before he could yank himself away with a scowl. "You clean Luigi's cage to keep her comfortable and clean, kotenok. Same principle, I need you to clean up your room so you stay clean and comfortable."

"Mamma…"

"And Felixa very nearly tripped over your shoes and went head-first into the lizard's tank this afternoon." The brat just stared at her now, the slight tinge of an embarrassed flush on his face slowly faded for something more the color of sour milk. "Oh, your lizard is fine. It was just a near-miss, she got back to her feet just in time."

Somehow, that wasn't what the kid was so upset by given that changed nothing about the look he was giving her.

He blinked slowly, which did not help her figure out what the hell was wrong now, and then turned back to the mildly bemused scientist observing them over the chess table. "Sorry, Mister Verde. We're going to have to come back to this later."

His excuse made, he immediately slid off the chair and trotted off through the connecting bathroom to his room. The door banging shut didn't muffle the sound of four somethings probably small and leather smacking a wall in short order.

"…okay. Well. That went better than I thought it might." Of course, she had absolutely no idea why. Regardless, one goal reached in this 'visit' and two still tussling puppies to mind for the short term, she turned back to Verde. "You got mail by the way, not showing up for lunch means you get a personal delivery. Unfortunately, it's addressed to one 'Gilles Verninac'."

"Indeed?" The green-haired man frowned, suspiciously eyeing the folded cardstock she pulled from a pocket and snorting softly when he realized his real name was plastered across one side. "Unusual… I don't believe I left a forwarding address, as difficult as it was to get out of the American Embassy in Paris without leaving one for their 'records'."

"Frankly, I'm not at all surprised this was sent here." Sonya tested the seal-sticker thing sealing the folded card shut absentley as she took in the lack of a return address as well as the utter lack of a stamp, then lifted a shoulder in a shrug as she handed it over. "I stop the overt attempts just by letting you live with me, which leaves open the oblique approaches like through the civilians."

He scoffed irritably, ripping through the tacky paper holding the flyer-thing shut. A moment spent scanning the interior, and the scientist glanced back up at her briefly. "I take it you already know the contents?"

"However did you guess?" It wasn't like it was hard, with only one side being sealed shut that left bending the two halves of cardstock away from each other to see what had been sent to one of her minions. "The thing is… it might be a good idea to go."

Occupying himself with reading through the mission statement his invitation to some egghead conference thing for a quiet moment, Verde delicately closed the card to slide away into his nearly ever-present lab coat and then pinned her with an unamused look from behind his coke-bottle glasses. "Why?"

"It will help showcase you're off the 'market', in a few ways, to more than just your fellow scientists."
Mafia people aren't the kind to stop chasing something until either it's dead or they risk horrifying death in the pursuit." Reaching down, she seized both dogs by the back of their ruffs and hauled them into her arms. "Just don't go alone."

The whole bundle of puppies wiggled and squirmed enough she had some serious concerns about accidentally squishing them, but it really only took a second for the two of them to realize their play-fight had been interrupted by her. The dogs gave her curious looks for the uncharacteristic weighing in on their little tussle, and the thief turned on a heel to take them outside where they could play without anyone caring.

"...the invitation is for two. However, taking Adrik that far from 'specialized' help for his lungs is not a particularly palatable idea even if the implications of doing so were ignored." Called the man at her back before she could figure out how to open the bedroom door without smashing one of the dogs' snouts into it.

She turned to press her back against the partially open door and open it that way. "When is it, exactly?"

"October sixteenth to the nineteenth." Verde had to fetch out the invitation to tell her, and he was occupied with that for the short moment she was facing him.

"I'll have Bjørn set those dates aside, so I can join you then." She tossed over her shoulder as she twisted and stepped out of his temporary room before the man could respond, dumping the dogs out of her arms and closing the door before either got the bright idea to dart back inside.

Before she could even take a step to follow their suddenly resumed play fight, the doorknob attempted to lodge itself into her lower spine. When she tossed Verde an annoyed look for the fresh bruise probably blooming on the small of her back she earned an apologetic grimace that didn't help her feel any better, not to mention both puppies had scampered off and she didn't know where or what might be at risk right now.

"...my apologies. Sonya are you... sure you wish to attend the conference with me?"

"If you can't see Adrik going, then why not?" She'd have to remember to bring a decently thick book for the event. Hawk was being an ever so industrious little bee by supplying several thick texts she had not read yet, and playing bodyguard for three days so Verde can showcase his 'off-limited-ness' to an at least decent degree wouldn't be much of a blip in her looming and busy fall schedule.

...she had to indulge in her library soon or wait for next year. It'd take a week, or two now, to get through everything but she really wanted to at least glancingly familiarize herself with what was new and pick a few suitable time-wasters before she had to leave Italy for a good chunk of the next few months.

She had gotten four jobs done trying to scope out the Socialist Republic of Romania earlier that year, but those had been minor errand-type jobs that just so happened to be close or near where she wanted to be. Kind of wasteful of her, but to be frank given what else the first half of the year had held for her she'd be more concerned when it became important.

"These kinds of events are more for lecturing others in the same field of work, and perhaps a bit of a think-tank for ideas, than for social mixing." Tried the man when she didn't give him more than one off-handed kind of question in response. "Not an event one takes even a casual acquaintance, nor would accompanying me do much for your."

"Verde, I have new books to read. I can assure you, I won't be bored." She interrupted with limited
amusement, a bit irked he was both questioning her and clarifying an event she held no illusions about being any great fun. "What's your real problem?"

"...bringing you along will likely impress the illusion that we are involved in some way. One does not typically bring... well... someone like you along for no reason." When she cocked an eyebrow in hopes for more information, he sighed disgustedly. "More than likely, it will be assumed I have brought you along to 'rub it into' the other's faces."

Sonya blinked, looked down at herself, then shot him a questioning glance. "Gossip is gossip, nothing anyone does will stop that. But... does that assumption have anything to do with the 'marvelous legs' thing I supposedly have?"

Verde gave her a strange look instead of responding.

"No? Then is it an exotic thing?" She tried next, getting a bit annoyed when he still refused to say anything. "Is there a problem with me going to this thing with you?"

"...not a problem, per say." Allowed the Lightning a bit bitterly, a half-sneer on his face. "I am fully aware a woman of your caliber has better options than one such as I. Regardless of any motivations on my own end to avoid aspects of your lifestyle I cannot perform to even Adrik's satisfaction, more specifically supporting and maintaining a falsehood for an inexplicit time frame, I do not believe you have given serious contemplation to the logistical problems of entering even a false relationship with a 'subordinate'."

She had to puzzle through that for a long moment, because fuck he was a mouthy little shit when he felt like talking, and eventually had to conclude she did in fact understand at least part of his issue. "I don't get what you mean by better options, but that's not important. The important part is keeping you alive and in one piece, preferably without injury to form or mind. I apologize if this makes you uncomfortable, but frankly I don't care. I've invested into you and intend to get my money's worth. If you feel as if you can't maintain the easier option, then I'll do it for us both."

"Sounds vaguely threatening." He almost added something to that, but eventually settled for a mildly looking confused glower. "If that is your advice, I suppose refusing would be unwise."

"I am sorry." Offered the thief slowly. While she didn't really understand what his issue was, she did at least knew he had one and that was more than enough for her. "Would it matter, or make you feel better about it, if I got Tatiana to go with you instead?"

"No." Verde flatly refused, hunching his shoulders and edging back to his temporary bedroom door. "I suppose a measure of time alone will clarify our positions and needs, as I seemingly fail to convey my position and you are unaware of the issues."

"For fuck's sake... there's only so many times you can be paired off with anything remotely male that stands too close to you before you stop listening to gossip, Verde. I've heard basically every variation about me and any male friends I have, been gossiped about having children with each of them, and some men that I had no knowledge about standing too close to me." She shot back a little shortly. "I get you've done the college thing, and aside studying or liquor the only other widespread common interest would be gossip. Trust me, it will not be as important to you in a couple years of false rumors being spread about your person. Especially when you no longer have 'academic behavior' to worry about."

Both of the man's eyebrows rose upward. "...I don't believe I see, but if your words hold true will be merely a matter of time until I do."
"Not so much as you might think." Lisa informed her from far away Moscow, as the maids whisked away the remains of the breakfast spread Fiorella had been absentmindedly nibbling upon while her morning lessons were underway. "While the only news sources we have are very limited and hard to get copies of, which I will not know the methods of these days given how long it's been since I've obtained a copy, there are ways to get news reporters to pick up certain stories. Some things even we can't keep from civilian attention, and if you can catch the in-between you can theoretically get news out of far places with limited effort."

"So, there's not an underground newsletter I can subscribe to?" She inquired wryly, because that would make this particular 'lesson' so much easier.

"No, there's not. At least, none I'd recommend as moderately trustworthy." Countered the older woman equally as dryly. "Now, the last three copies of your local newspaper…"

"I have them right here."

"More often than not, you won't be looking for the feel-good stories. Focus on anything 'strange', or just this side of 'odd coincidence'. Unfortunate fates for one or several individuals in the obituaries, any inexplicit industrial explosions or accidents, and opinion pieces."

Yeah, Fiorella had been afraid of that… wait, what?

Nearly fumbling the phone, she replaced the receiver between her cheek and shoulder firmly before her Mafia Home Tutor could continue. "Um… Lisa? Opinions?"

"Yes, I am entirely serious about that one." Was the completely bland reply through the static of the phone line. "And the personal section, the ads pages? As long as one can post something to the paper for others to read, it's an entirely valid method to entice another of us with a particular specialty to contact you. Or post general warnings, as long as they are worded on one side of 'innocent sounding'."

Huffing softly, she reached for the first of the newspapers the maids had set aside for her. "Well… I suppose you would know."

"It should not be that strange, Fiorella. Personal ads are used for that exact reason. Why wouldn't we make use of what's there?"

In some ways, Fiorella was very much relieved they had to conduct this long-distance mentorship through a phone line. She could pull faces all she desired at the new and somewhat depressing lessons, and Lisa would let it slide as she didn't have to put up with seeing them being pulled at her.

Shaking the first of the less than a week-old newspaper editions open, she glanced at the rather unfortunate headline. "First paper, Il Secolo Decimonono, leading story reads about… um…"

"Don't be shy." Lisa coaxed, with a curl of obvious amusement at her pause threading through her slightly tinny tone. "I can almost guarantee you I've heard and read stranger and while I am here for you, your little friend is safe from me spreading gossip about her group's behavior."

"…more union strikes." Fiorella was going to skip the speculation piece right next to the headline article, which was summed up as 'strikes likely influenced by the autonomist student movement that took over a Milan automobile factory last year'. "There is also some coverage on the continued
Piazza Fontana bombing, and what the police are looking for in suspects."

'Autonomist' being a 'home-grown communist', anti-authoritarian, left-wing political group getting more and more militant as the time stretched on. Mentioning that to the communist she was speaking to in hopes of discussing it might be a bit tasteless, even if this periodical was a fully independent run newspaper.

She had hoped to avoid the more politically charged nastiness that was building up in northern Italia by picking the papers she had, but maybe it was a little too much to ask for…

"Neither are quite what we are looking for." Allowed the older woman after a succinct and slightly edited summary of both stories. "What doesn't stand out to you as 'newsworthy' yet is given seemingly inappropriate attention?"

It would make sense that if there were any criminal dealing in a newspaper that the articles in question would not be 'above the fold' and stuck between others. Those above tended to be more breaking news or public warning notices and would be read more often than anything below the fold or inside, and consequently given more attention. She obligingly opened the old copy of the local daily paper to see what else there may be for Lisa's lesson, scanning through the rest of the front-page news then switching to the inside pages.

"Wouldn't an act of terrorism be of interests?" Fiorella questioned mainly to take up the time while she searched for a possible offering.

"Yes, and not always. However, I know of the bombing you're speaking of. It wasn't us. Too much death, even if one of us had issues with that bank it was done a touch too openly. Had the explosion been after hours, on the other hand…"

Given the death toll, she was rather glad to hear of it. Silver lining, for all the wanton death still made her cringe in empathy for the poor survivors left behind. "Small follow up notice, for a string of murders in Venice. Police are still investigating, asking for any witnesses who may have any information about the victims' last known locations to come forward."

Lisa made an interesting humming sound, which her eldest daughter was also prone to using when she found something to question going on. "Hmm… possibly. Not a local incident… but… is there another article with more information?"

Fiorella obediently discarded that newspaper for an even older edition, reflecting wryly that this story would be hard to get secondary confirmation on. Nilda had been focused more on the western side of north Italia, Venice was on the complete other side of the peninsula. "Here it is… um, six victims. All well. All were beheaded, one head is still missing…?"

"…really now."

She merely blinked at the strange tone from the older woman, unable to help the slight grimace twisting her lips as she read more about what little was known about how or why. "I don't think dear Nilda will be able to help much with this one, Lisa."

"Anything else… strange? Or 'off' about this story?" Pressed her Tutor, rather uncharacteristically for something that might not be of much help in her aims of educating her in mafia-esque etiquette.

Perhaps it was just novelty, picking through news from a far-flung country Lisa wasn't in that made her so curious. Admittedly just about everything could be used to teach Fiorella how to pick up mafia-related news in civilian sources, as long as they were examples, and not everything could be
"No witnesses, discovered in the early morning by a rather unfortunate soul, five of the six... uh, heads were stuck on an iron fence overlooking one of the cannels. Which led law enforcement to the scene of the crime."

"...Venice is your city built over water, right? Perhaps it was just a lack of real estate... when you go in for your evening dance lesson, as Nya what they did to piss her off so much."

She dropped the phone to clatter noisily on the dining table in shock and scrambling to pick it back up made quite an undignified racket, as she rather failed to secure her grip on the plastic for several embarrassing seconds. "I am so sorry about that, Lisa."

"Fiorella..."

"There's a difference between knowing and, well... knowing." Defended the Italian mother weakly, plastering the hand not holding the phone to her ear to her face tiredly as she reordered her thoughts. "Your daughters are personable and very understanding, reconciling that with-"

"Being able to commit horrible crimes against humanity and being charmingly charismatic are not mutually exclusive states, my dear. Not a common mix, admittedly, but not impossible in the range of human behavior." Interrupted the Home Tutor kindly, if a bit ruthlessly herself. "I am aware you find my daughters to be delightful, but that does not mean they are always as delightful as you find them. They are very capable women, raised for this lifestyle, and find the disconnect you seem intent on stumbling over as just a facet of life to be aware of rather than something to mourn or be discomforted by. You need to keep that in mind, not just for your own safety but to be aware of in the individuals you are insisting to no longer be sheltered from."

"It all still relies on the difference between merely knowing and experiencing the knowledge personally..." Fiorella offered wryly, wincing as she traced her eyes over the news article again to see what the mother suspected her younger daughter of doing. "I don't mean to make excuses, Lisa."

Her Tutor hummed liltingly, still musically even through the slightly metallic tone of the long-distance phone line. "Nya is very conservative when it comes to lying, finding the effort involved in maintaining a falsehood rather tedious unless the stakes are high enough to be 'worth' her time. She'll imply left, right, up, down and sideways... but she will not directly lie unless she has no other choice. If you ask her, it's very likely she'll inform you what you want to know unless it is important to another individual or situation she deems more important. Including motivations, what she might've done otherwise, and why she didn't default to that instead."

Which meant being able to verify this story through Lisa's daughters made it equally worth a news story Nilda or her husband Silvano could verify for Fiorella's lessons. "How... how did you jump from a few details of this to Sonya's personal involvement?"

"Ah, I believe I must leave that question up to you to find. Not quite safe to have over a landline connection right now." She sidestepped neatly, but not unkindly. "Let's just say... some of us tend to have habits we stick to for certain reasons. Identification, calling cards, claiming stakes. It's not done often, mind you. Too easily tracked, and frankly too easily faked to blame another for a particularly unpleasant situation for most, but then again... hmm... how should I phrase this...?"

"I believe I can guess the biggest downside to doing so with her."

"Entirely possible."
Nilda had been on a bit of a campaign to acquaint her with the general reputations of various Dying Will Flame users as far as most Italians knew them. Clouds and Storms featured just a tiny bit more than the others did. The Rain claimed there was no particular reason for it aside covering a topic her Tutor couldn't over easily compromised communication lines, but she didn't quite need too much time to understand her bodyguard was attempting to arm her with the information around the frankly bewildering and sometimes contradictory behavior around Hard Flame Cloud users.

There was only so far blind faith would go, and she was a little beyond that point these days. She wanted to still see the good in the outright criminal ranks around her but knew more than enough to know seeing only that good would blind her to the dangers at the same time.

That didn't mean there was no good, just she shouldn't let trying to find it blind her to the almost casual cruelty those belonging to the Mafia could do at the same time.

"Was it safe to tell me she was involved?"

"No one in Moscow would care, and it's hearsay to anyone on your end. Nya saves it for special offences, so a repeat so soon is not very likely if she's now home from her 'trip'." Lisa admitted cheerfully, more metal joint noises sounding as a low voice spoke Russian to her in the pause. "I think I may need to assign homework, my dear. Catch your lovely bodyguard to go through the local papers with you but bear in mind she likely won't tell you any of the 'highly' sensitive details behind anything in the news."

"I appreciate the time you give me, Lisa." There was less than two weeks until school resumed for her own sons, the older woman had probably continually mounting details and troubles to solve before her school opened for the next scholastic year. "Do you want me to pass anything on to your girls when I see them tonight?"

"Hmm… no, I will see Tats soon myself and she will undoubtedly tell me anything I could wish to know."

"Very well, anything else?"

"Find three small-time incidents or our related ads in your papers and be prepared to discuss them tomorrow, including how you realized they meant more than it seemed and what they might actually mean to say. I'll secure my side and would appreciate it if you secure your side as well, so we may speak more frankly then. Otherwise, I do need to get on with work today."

"Of course."

"You will also ask Nya, tonight." Lisa continued shrewdly, and rather without mercy for such an innocent sounding demand. "I will ask Tats and know if you don’t later, but I think the process might be good for your understanding of this lifestyle."

She could avoid it for a time, but not really for all that long to be worth disappointing her Mafia Home Tutor. Dangling the possibility of not knowing for a short while under her nose was rather cruel of the older woman, but she at least realized it for the character test it was. "Alright."

It had been a month of daily conversations and lessons, Fiorella knew at least a little of what kind of personality made up Sonya’s mother.

"Then I will speak with you tomorrow, Fiorella. Have a good morning."

She gave her own farewell more or less absentely, peeling the newspaper article from that edition of the paper and setting it aside for later. Hanging up the phone when the dial tone informed her the
older woman had ended the call on her end, she regarded the editions still waiting for her to hunt through.

Nilda had mentioned she had business in the city today, on Silvano's behalf as her husband had a meeting to do about the more civilian-friendly shipping business he also ran when not being a Mafia Don. She had made the mistake of asking the swordsman when she was advised to ask her bodyguard once, she didn't want a repeat of that particular lecture on intentional or not biases and exactly following directions until she had the experience to protect herself from the consequences.

This morning was apparently going to be one she could dedicate to her sons, and frankly Fiorella was bitterly thankful for that. While her lessons never went overly long, not since those first few awkward mornings, usually her head was too full of suspicions and uneasy realizations to enjoy her children's innocence.

She could sit Federico down and answer a few probably burning questions her oldest son had about the sudden and unplanned summer vacation from the Iron Fort, then spend some time with him and Enrico before they all had to go home so they could attend school. Undoubtedly if she told her middle child why they had come all the way out to Genoa he might very well ask if she could get into a fight with their father every summer, so they could go swimming and see her parents.

More importantly, Lisa had let her go in time to snuggle with Massimo for his morning nap. Not that she'd be able to focus on her youngest entirely with this subject lingering at the back of her mind, but it was the little blessings she was going to count. Fiorella stacked away the newspapers for later, tucking the single article away in a pocket for this evening, and left the dining room for the Superbi nursery.

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(Friday the 24th of July, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Ah… that." Tatiana answered mischievously. "One, yes that was my baby sister. Another-"

"Tatiana." Sonya snapped irritably, flicking her wrist to get her older sister to mind the young Chinese girl's practice instead of nose into the conversation. "Give us a second."

"I don't really have much of a question, really." Insisted Fiorella quietly, taking back the scrap of paper she had been holding all day and finally letting her bodyguard see what was so damn important. "Lisa ordered me to ask, however. So… why?"

Nilda scanned through the article for the salient details with more than enough time to refocus back on her fellow blonde before she decided how to handle this particular topic.

Even if the older woman had no burning questions, she sure as fuck did. The Rain distinctly recalled being snapped at about this particular woman 'not ripping off heads', and yet apparently that was indeed a risk one ran pissing her off.

"I dislike homicide as a principle." Started the thief slowly, a faint scowl on her usually neutral features. "If I have to kill, odds are I'm starting to slip in my key skill sets enough to seriously need to contemplate retirement. However, there are exceptions I will make allowances for. You generally have a set of those by the time you get to my point in this lifestyle, and I'm not that even tempered compared to most."

"There wasn't a way you could ask them not to do whatever it was?" Under a twin set of dubious
looks from the both of them, Lady Vongola sighed heavily. "I take it not."

"Why would they listen to me? I'm just some random bitch from Russia that shouldn't have a damn opinion on anything such men get up to in their little corner of the world. Without a reason to mind what I say, they aren't going to. Sometimes not even then, assuming they can get away with it behind my back even if they obviously can't." Sonya agreed rather sardonically, which earned her a faint blush from the brunette, and she sighed heavily looking a touch tired of the entire subject already. "It wasn't so much what they were doing than what they had been involved with. I'm a fucking grown woman, I can stand being fucked around with. Shit happens and all that. I will not understand their involvement with harming my godson by depriving him of his godfather's presence and taking a trophy that really belonged to him than in their hands."

Wiling a bit more, Fiorella sighed heavily herself. "I thought it might be something along those lines."

"Disappointed?" She inquired blandly, wiping any expression off her face as she could do so effortlessly to the point her fellow blonde was slightly envious of.

"...not so much. In fact, given what I know about mafia life and why you all are forced to police yourselves, I honestly rather suspected that." Mourned the older woman sadly. "I still believe you shouldn't have to, but without a central authority you all look to there's no way to enforce a uniformed and comprehensive set of rules down with related punishments to deter misbehavior. And that would turn you all into some very shadowy government types, which might be an actual minor blessing that you're not that networked."

Sonya arched an eyebrow at that tidbit of suspected information that had more basis in reality than just what she wished for, leaving open a moment where Nilda could capitalize upon to get a question or two of her own answered instead of revisit the topic of the Vindice. "Sonya, beheading?"

"I have just completed a set of four soup bowls." Insisted the thief wickedly, a way too toothy smirk on her face now. "Might need another four, just to be through."

...soup bowls?

Thankfully Fiorella was the one who asked, much to the sadistic pleasure of her temporary dance and self-defense instructor. "Soup bowls. Made from skulls of formerly living assholes. They're in the kitchen... did you see the shelf?"

Lady Vongola went a bit green around the gills, and frankly the Rain wasn't much better off. Her stomach attempted to knot itself in protest from the mere idea of attempting to eat anything out of the skull of 'formerly living assholes'.

"Sonya... that is not okay." Attempted the mother of three queasily, not quite able to look her in the eye and attempt telling the Storm-Cloud that at the same time. "That is... for one incredibly disgusting, rather unhygienic, and furthermore a rather stupid risk to run by having them close at hand. Why would you keep the skulls of... your...?"

"Enemies near at hand, and feed those contemplating being my adversaries blood-colored soup in it if they attempt anything close to home? Of course it's not okay, Fiorella. That's the point." The rather twisted smirk didn't fade from her face, in fact it might've gotten a bit worse as Nilda watched this exchange with no small measure of horror of her own. "We aren't the type of people to respect anything less than gruesome, horrific actions as any kind of deterrent. And as I can't spike the skulls on my fence in warning, I had to find something else to do with them."
Her charge turned to her, and she raised both hands. "Silvano and I don't do anything near that level of gruesome… but we have enough men that he didn't need to at all. Straight murder is generally the base retribution for treason or traitorous behavior for most famiglias."

Fiorella still regarded her suspiciously, not remotely comforted. "And my husband?"

"...Vongola history so drenched in blood that Tyr the Sword Emperor has started an entire branch of nothing but assassins to handle his responsibilities to Timoteo Vongola. The Varia Assassination Squads." Sonya pointed out with an absent shrug, not kindly but not entirely rudely either. "Beyond speculation, that particular question should wait until you are back on speaking terms with him so he can comprehensively review Vongola-centric information."

Going a bit pale under her lingering green tinge, the older woman abruptly walked off to seat herself at the closest dining table in the adjoining room. Cesare whisked out a coffee tray with several empty cups and the carafe of black steaming caffeine from the kitchen just to set it at her elbow silently before going back to whatever he was cooking with apples and rum, allowing the woman the privacy to adjust herself to that information.

"...but soup bowls?" Nilda questioned again, because she kind of agreed with her charge about how nasty she found the entire subject.

"Mrs. Silvery-White, if I didn't horrify you to this point would anyone in the Superbi Famiglia respect me as an entity to not piss off if you visit me so often without issue?" Snorting softly before she could even hope to offer an answer to that, the thief lifted her tattooed shoulder in a bastardized shrug. "Besides, I don't keep useless things. If there was no use for them, I'd probably have them tossed in short order."

"You can't think of anything else to use to terrify your neighbors into being properly respectful of you?"

"Anything that would last several months of not being here, when I have several children and completely ineffectual parents of young Flame users who have been taken advantage of before?" Shot back the thief sarcastically, huffing when she hesitated trying to think of anything else. "I will make myself into a monster even Vongola will fear if that is what I need to do to protect Shamal. I'll do it happily and without regret, too. I can no longer afford to be as nice or uninvolved in local issues as I planned on, given Renato's… disappearance, and as a foreign bitch of a Russian who steals for a living instead of anything more 'respectable'?"

She studied the other woman closely for a second. "...I'm naming you godmother to whatever heir Silvano and I have."

Her first answer was a slow blink. "What the hell is wrong with your head?"

"The same thing wrong with yours if you found all that perfectly reasonable to risk just for a boy you're mothering even if he's not biologically yours." Nilda insisted brightly, leaving the Russian behind to tend to her charge's slightly shaky mental state. "You want to cover the Vindice or should I? I think the topic might be a bit past due to cover."

"You're Italian. You have the Italian Mafia views on them." Sonya eyed them both for a long moment, and then scoffed as she turned to leave the dining room in the direction that opened up to the rest of her castle home. "Have an hour, then we are going to be reviewing and refining her ballet skills sometime before midnight."

"I apologize, are we interrupting your incredibly busy day?"
"I have a date tonight, so yes you are." She shot back blandly, ignoring all four sets of eyes that immediately turned to her with varying levels of incredulity. "With several bookcases, if you must know. Sometimes you just can't adjust to information in any kind of reasonable timeframe or any privacy. Fiorella, I am going to push you to act like nothing's wrong at least in hour or two. None of us will care if you mess up and need five minutes, but this is a skill that might just save your life in a tight spot so before you can entirely come to terms with us you will be doing your practice tonight."

The older woman nodded simply, lips pressed together in a thin line and tightening her hold on the fresh poured coffee in her hands. "I appreciate the hour to... adjust, Sonya."

Not replying verbally, the thief merely shot her a considering look over her shoulder before going off to accommodate them and Fiorella's uneasy state with some personal time.

Nilda took the seat across from her charge, which coincidentally let her spot a certain shelf over the assassin's workstation holding three skulls she had thought were just bleached wood carvings of skulls for some creepy novelty bowls. On second glance, the 'teeth' still attached to the upper jaw had a couple very interesting metal bits.

…that looked like actual dental fillings one would get for cavities.

Delightful. It had been staring her in the face every time she visited, and until told she hadn't even glanced at it twice.

"You weren't allowed to notice." Suddenly offered the younger brunette teenager that hadn't been there before that very second, silently taking the extra mug Sonya had snubbed for going off to do whatever for the hour's worth of grace. "Miss Bazanova said to keep everything sensitive from outsiders' notice, and that is sensitive we kept from your notice."

"That is significantly less galling than just overlooking it through sheer ignorance." Not by much, but it was something. The Rain offered to pour for the girl in thanks for the reassurance, a wry smirk on her lips. "You don't usually hang around, Mirror Lady."

"I rarely have anything of substance to offer." The soft-spoken if scarcely effective Mist informed her, glancing over to the so far silent woman with indigo stained eyes and considering her until the older woman notice her attentions. "I came into my Flames rather late for Mists standards, Lady Vongola. I was nearly twelve. The very first thing I conjured into existence was rope, to prevent my death in the moment. The very next thing was a monster of shadow and spite, which was more effective in preserving my life than simple restraints proved when my attacker slipped from them but not something that could independently hunt after her."

Fiorella gazed mournfully at the girl. "Her?"

"My older sister, a very jealous and hateful girl I loved anyways." Anna's smile was not a comforting thing. "I still love her, even if the very next time we see each other she will likely attempt to finish the job. She avoids me now even if I never managed to escape her before, because she knows I can summon another if she does not stay away and let me live as I like."

"...I take it to mean you suggest I am not dealing with very rational people?"

"Oh, they are rational. It just depends if you can reach a level of rational they understand. Miss Bazanova is more used to that than most as most Mists are considered insane, but she has so many of us near at hand and has been at least understanding about our... peculiarities."

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, the mother of three slowly refocused on the Mist that normally just
handled their transportation and mirror needs. "That is some very interesting information, Anna. I appreciate you sharing this with me."

"I do not find the topic painful, although others seem to disagree." Countered the Mirror Lady politely, giving both older women a nod of respect before fading from view. Coffee and all.

"I think," eventually allowed the ex-civilian wryly into the surprisingly not awkward silence the young girl left behind, "I have gotten much more than I ever cared to learn today. I'm going to stop asking questions now."

"Don't want to know what the Vindice are?"

"It's not the first time they have come up but given how stoutly the two of you try to avoid the topic, that might be a bit much on top of everything else I've already learned today and haven't had the time to absorb." Fiorella pointed out simply before taking a bracing sip of her drink. "Besides, Lisa hasn't raised the topic yet. If the call tomorrow will be secured, then I can ask her for what she wants me to know as my Tutor before you risk something going around her."

She saluted her with her coffee cup, because that was a very damn good point to raise.

(Wednesday the 29th of July, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Taking his share of the paperwork being handed out, Ganauche peeked into his portion of the assignments to see if there could be a short visit north snuck in anywhere. It unfortunately didn't look like it, something he kind of rather regretted since Tatiana would be going to her homeland in less than a month and then it would be even harder to get the time to spend with her.

There were always phone calls. They just weren't as warm as the Sun nurse herself in person.

"Additionally," continued their rather exhausted looking Sky who was finished handing out things to check into for him to do over the next month, pinning each of them with a look, "there's been a few rumors of a meeting Lady Vongola will be conducting in a few days."

"Will she?" Posed Coyote Nougat without looking up from his set of paperwork, speaking for most the other Guardians by the skeptical looks on not only the Rain Guardian's but also the Sun's faces.

"Nilda's going to be there, right?" He countered, much to Timoteo's appreciation he could feel through their Flames. "Do you want a couple of us to go so they know she's there with your full support?"

"Would you and Croquant mind taking a few days to do that?"

Glancing over at the Mist in question, he nodded and waved his handful of reports. "What should we do with these then?"

"I believe Coyote and Schnitten would not mind helping you two out with that." Allowed Timoteo mildly, shooting Brown Nie a stern look. "Her Home Tutor has a hand in arranging that meeting, care to rephrase those thoughts gentlemen?"

The Storm blew out a sigh, reaching over and yanking a good portion of the paper in Ganauche's hands out to add to his handful. "Who is Russian and we're Italian, Timoteo. Like it or not, on advice of her Tutor doesn't always mean it's a good idea for Fiorella."

"How much further down do you want to dig yourself?" At the ugly glare tossed his way, he gave a
roguish grin back. "Timoteo and I wouldn't have to do a damn thing, either. The moment the staff heard you diss the 'Lady Tutor Primakova'…?"

"Ganauche." A chiding tone with a look to match, and their Sky turned back to give his oldest Guardian his full if mildly irritated attention. "Problem, Coyote?"

"Not on our end, I don't think. But it's going to be said, Timoteo. It'll always hang over Lady Fiorella's head now." He pointed out, taking excessive pain to ensure his own tone was completely nonjudgmental. "No matter how well Miss Elisaveta trains up your wife, it's not how Italians or Vongola operates."

"And what would you have me do instead?" Inquired their Sky with almost cringe-worthy fake curiosity.

"We all know there wasn't any other options. You had the best of bad ones to pick from and given the problems we had getting it solved at all no one will bitch about that either. Won't change what will be said, either."

Don Vongola gave his longest-serving Guardian a completely professional smile. "What doesn't help is getting back-talked by our own behind her back. Doesn't it? She'll have a hard enough time, if your views on it will end up being what the others think, without my own men doing it as well."

Coyote gave him a level look, then nodded. "As you say, then."

"If there's nothing else?" Timoteo addressed the rest of them with both a tone and the expression to suggest there really should not be anything more. "Ganauche, Croquant, a moment."

Schnitten Brabanters did stop momentarily to take more than two thirds of the work in the Mist Guardian's hands, but the rest did obediently escape the Don's office in short order. Leaving just the three men and whoever the dark-skinned man trusted to watch over their Boss when he had Guardian duties to handle.

"I may not like how Coyote phrased his point, but he does have one." Pointed out the Lightning after a moment where nothing was said and they all spent it just staring at one another. "Although, he could be less of an asshole about it."

"He's always been rather sensitive to how our actions would be perceived to other famiglias." He allowed dryly, waving the half-assed defense of his own right hand off. "I don't hold it against him, and he'll ensure what I've told him will become what is said with enough time. It's just been a long while since we had need of that particular skill set of his… you might not have been with us at the time."

Possibly not. Ganauche had joined up before Brow Nie, but well after everyone else aside the still silent man standing next to him.

"Why don't you take some of your free time and go see your new lady, Ganauche?"

It wasn't all that long ago he finally got off medical leave, to pick up at least a moderate workload again, and he was kind of itching to not be so useless anymore. Although it also wasn't really all that long ago he had been looking for an excuse to go see her, either he was really that transparent or their Sky had plans. "Okay, did you want something?"

"You said there were several young Mists at Death Castle aside young Shamal, right?" Glancing at the so far silently waiting Mist Guardian, Timoteo gestured out the expansive set of windows overlooking a side garden. "Do you think he might be able to-"
"You remember Dante D'Attilio?" He interrupted a touch hastily, but it did earn him his Sky's complete attention. "The Etiquette instructor of Mafia School? The one both Sonya and Elisaveta liked? He tried that with a bit of commonly accepted Italian facts. They weren't at all amused."

"Which parts?" Inquired his fellow Guardian, very nearly scaring him out of his own socks.

"I thought you didn't talk?" The accusation merely earned him the raised red eyebrow over dark shades which had become a kind of addition the Ninth Generation had somehow added to their dress without explicitly speaking about it. "I didn't ask, the man was rather disgruntled and a touch hung over when he told me about it over dinner."

"...Cavallone passed on Miss Bazanova claimed to be one of the first three Moscow Flame users after that strange century long drought most of the world suffered through during the Great Wars." Timoteo mused aloud, almost sounding like it was an admission against his will, considering them both intently as he absentely played with the Vongola Sky Ring. "I think... instead, I want you to go see to Mafia School. The both of you. First, if you don't mind."

"...random. "Sure? I don't mind, if you think we can be spared that long."

"It's important." Claimed the Vongola Don, strangely confident for something that was a thought tagged on the end of a few different topics needing some serious stretches in mental gymnastics to connect.

Yeah, there were young Flame users at Bazanova's place. There might be a couple interesting things she rediscovered about Flame natures they had long since forgotten being the reason for behind a few of their traditions. Somethings that might even become a sore point for a made man who was making a career out of knowing the reason for why things had to be done in certain ways. He wouldn't be the first one to connect all that to 'there is something we need to be concerned with there', not without some serious investigation first into something concerning.

It wasn't Ganauche's first encounter with the famed 'Vongola Intuition', but it was a first to be given responsibility to carry out the strange orders to find what was so important. Coyote and Brow got the last one, and they were focusing rather heavily trying to find even one lost cadet line of Primo Vongola out in Japan. The last time he heard that tone from Timoteo had been when the Sky informed him so deadly serious that the next car he busted might very well be his last if he didn't pay more attention.

"Not with Instructor D'Attilio alone?" Asked his fellow Guardian, still without inflection.

Possibly there was some, he just wasn't all that sure given how rarely he heard the Mist speak.

"...no. Just... volunteer around, if you would."

So much for putting aside some real time to spend with Tatiana and let her know the information he had cobbled together about the other prospective Lightning Guardians his Sky hadn't picked.

"Anything else we should do while we're there?" He asked, because with his one burning question of the day asked it wasn't likely Croquant Bouche would inquire. Even how slim a chance would be to get more than one nudge from the Ninth Sky's version of his line's Intuition, trying wouldn't harm anything.

Timoteo blinked slowly, then smirked. "Well, if you're offering..."
"Usov," Sonya started with a touch awkwardly but then again, this topic was probably either going to be a non issue or a tricky one to navigate, "you're still a Zolotov."

"I am." Brightly agreed the Mist in question, giving her a slightly demented grin from under his father's elbow where he twisted to see her standing in the doorway clearly. Maximillian looked briefly alarmed while glancing between his son and her, but slowly relaxed the longer the silence went on and nothing happened.

"Do you have a plan for that?" She eventually asked warily, when nothing else seemed to happen.

The edge to the young child's smirk turned a bit more wicked, an impressive feat given it was already a shade too intent to be comfortable either seeing or wearing. "Of course!"

She glanced at the boy's father curiously who still looked only mildly alarmed, so it was probably safe to ignore him, then back at the one she had come to speak with. "Do I want to know?"

"Nope!" Usov's smirk was now almost wider than his entire face allowed, distinctly inhuman in either how wide it was or by how gleefully he was waiting for her to ask the obvious follow up.

Opting not to go there, she knew better, the thief turned to her master of domestic accounts rather uneasily waiting out her questioning the loyalty of his son. "Is everyone registered and the fees paid for the next school year? Did the kids pick a school they liked?"

"There were only a few to pi-"

"Aww..." Outright sulking while the older man nodded distractedly and tried to answer her, the second oldest Mist she had turned back to the little sheaf of comics he had been perusing before she entered the office space. "No fun, Dama."

Now stubbornly not going there, she pinned the boy's father with an expectant look to offer some other topic or issue. Maximillian looked entirely regretful for a full second, which really should've been a warning. "Usov, what are you doing?"

Brightening, to the point he was literally giving off visible light somehow and his shadow was reduced to nothing even under his tan corduroy pants, the child turned around on that old beaten up couch so fast he very nearly tore the paper he was holding. "I could start reporting on you, if you'd like...?"

That would do nothing but harass Gedeon, and quite frankly... "I have no grudge with the Zolotov clan, just the current leader."

Usov looked thoughtful now, which was honestly more terrifying than his gleeful-face. "Just the current leadership? How curious."

Leaving him to work out how to weasel that into whatever he had planned, she gave a half-hearted wave goodbye to the father son pair and got the hell out of there. She liked the kid decently well, but there was only so much specifically malicious Mist poking she could tolerate on a good day and Usov had pretty much made it his job to take it all up as often as he could.
Probably in a drive to ensure there would be no other Mists invited in to further 'infringe' on his… whatever it was. Sonya might know she was part of whatever Usov's Mistborn insanity had latched onto, but she didn't entirely understand how she was involved in it.

She did kind of wonder if his parents were part of it with her or not… but there was no way to ask without ensuring she'd never learn.

Alek glanced up at her curiously but didn't immediately paw at her boots to get picked up, so he could avoid the maids trying to sneakily pet him, meaning the Storm-Cloud ignored the canine for now. He'd whine at her if there was something wrong, or he just felt like being lazy.

On their way out from the back rooms of the castle, Cesare tipped his head in her direction which made her assume he wanted a word. Or just was acknowledging her passing by. At the very least, he seemed willing to speak with her instead of look at her strangely when she approached.

"I am a little surprised," started the chef-assassin in a reasonably business-like tone of voice, "how well your suggested cover ended up working. Not to say I've been specifically asking around, mind you, but all I can hear about that little outing is what you claimed would happen."

Sonya blinked at him blankly for a long moment, but he was rather systematically pressing a filling into some ravioli pasta wrappers without looking at her. "You're stranger than fiction."

He glanced at her over a shoulder questioningly.

"What's more interesting to talk about? Something run of the mill, or some happening that doesn't happen often coming from one of those 'dirty foreigners'?" The delicate sneer that crossed his face likely meant he entirely understood her point. "There will be those that suspect or realize the truth, more by those like you than those like me, and they will just be ignored by those that supposedly 'know better' about Flame user habits supposedly 'preventing' that truth."

Fuck, reminders still kind of hurt.

At least she knew Renato, or whoever he was becoming, was alright if just not here… unlike his old friends, who were all outright abandoned for the meantime.

…that is assuming the hitman was planning on picking up or reforging all his previous relationships later when he was 'safer'. Well, as safe as a Mafioso and contract killer could be in this life.

Rubbing the side of her neck as she wondered about that, the thief hesitated instead of continuing to wander her way up to the library to bury herself in more books. "Was there anything else?"

"Budgeting for meals isn't part of Maximillian's skill set." Cesare informed her leadingly, returning to his stuffed pasta shells and the ingredients to make more for the entire household's lunch.

"And you just so happen to know how to do it for Italy's markets?"

"I am a chef, with a somewhat checkered past, who worked in several medium to high-end restaurants before. Not to boast of past glories or anything." Sniffed the Mafioso faux arrogantly, throwing her a smirk as he finished systematically running through his freshly made pasta circles and herbed meat filling waiting to be pressed into them. "Not to mention, with your widespread nationalities represented in residence, perhaps a case might be made to set aside Wednesday or Thursday to make traditional foods of other cultures. Which would be only slightly more expensive, due to how difficult it might be to acquire the staples or spices more common in a particular slice of the world."
"Okay… not particularly objectionable." She knew full well he did it on request for breakfast, again depending on what ingredients he had on hand. "I take it you'd like to help manage your budget then?"

"Would not object if you wouldn't mind, but no. I am more angling for an acquisition budget, to buy up what might become available if I just so happen to find it."

That would be… four?

Four separate budgets for 'acquisitions'.

Adrik had one as part of the security setup, basically spending whatever he needed to ensure the basic of basic concerns were answered. Being a thief himself, he had a very damn good idea what was utterly crap verses what gave a professional a serious pause to encounter. Right now, he was getting a better than average idea of how much it all cost to have or get installed and doing the more obvious 'thieves here' signatures of residence that might not really apply this far from Moscow.

Hawk currently had her book budget looking for anything that even slightly seemed familiar to him in any bookstore he could find, and while it was a modest amount it was funds set aside for years for that exact or similar purpose it wasn't exactly unlimited nor with anything to replace what was spent. Now she had two books waiting to be published and marketed in European markets it was kind of slowly regenerating, fitfully and probably with no great rush but there was income fueling that.

Afanasii had one as the general handyman slash groundskeeper slash day-to-day gofer he was turning into. No real training or instruction in any job field aside factory work made it kind of sketchy to assign him a title, but the guy was generally filling in on inspecting any possible issue or ensuring the construction workers had the access they needed to finish up their work. Right as of now he was keeping an eye on the men installing an elevator at the back of the castle, between runs to the town to get fasteners or duct tape to ensure everything remained in working condition until professionals were called in.

Maximillian didn't really have one, but he had the entire household funds set aside for the castle to work with. He could squeeze something out of one of the accounts set up to handle bills or reasonable day to day expenses that might occur, but there wasn't a specific sum of money set aside for acquiring anything like household goods. Which… there probably should be, for cleaners and other cleaning goods for Ruslana's minding of the maids' efforts against dirt and dust in the castle.

"I would say 'fine, whatever' and hand you an entire pile of gemstones to pay for it, but I think Bjørn is about ready to actually swear at me for not using a currency he can track to pay you off."

Cesare tried, he really did, but the utterly delighted grin that snuck across his face kind of gave his thoughts on the matter away. "Oh… disappointing. I rather liked that charming habit of yours…"

Sonya considered it, because why not. She was the boss, and if she couldn't pay off her dues with a palmful of jewels then what kind of jewel thief was she?

…one not very apologetically murdered by her money man who was attempting to ensure this current lifestyle was sustainable without untraceable extras being poured into the cracks behind his back, so her godson had all the trappings he needed for his childhood living in a fucking castle. She could send her Lacky the gems to hawk and put into an account for Cesare, that would have to work.

She told her chef such, earning a wistful little sigh.
"I suppose that shall have to work, Lovely Bossy Dragoness." Allowed the man wryly, with a sly twitch of a movement dropping a tiny bit of extra meat to the floor which Alek immediately pounced upon and licked up. Ignoring that he did any such thing, he gathered up the freshly made ravioli to cook the rest of the way on the stove.

Guessing that was the end of that conversation, she padded on past the kitchens aiming for the staircases. Her sister was the next sudden interruption, which did allow enough time for her puppy to slink back to her side rather suspiciously licking his chops as nonchalantly as he could manage with slightly off-white fur advertising his presence so loudly.

"Nya!" With a slightly fixed grin to go with her cringe-inducing level of chipper-ness, the blonde obligingly waited to hear what slightly concerning thing the nurse had learned on her run around the local town. "Someone got murdered in the village."

Sonya blinked at her slowly but did at least follow along when she pulled her up the staircase away from probably eavesdropping maids. The redhead bounced over the banister aiming for the master bedroom the sisters were sharing, likely with the end goal of the shower in mind after speaking about whatever was on her mind.

"Not a crime of passion, either. Someone popped a middle-aged bachelor, in the dead of night, and there's almost no suspects to it from what the policeman I chatted up said. The Mirror Lady didn't spot it before it happened either."

"…well then, it probably wasn't a hitman." From her half-delirious eavesdropping on Renato lecturing Cherep about Catholic hitmen, 'innocents' would translate to some random man in the middle of nowhere who probably did nothing illegal in his life. If that held true beyond the next obvious step of background checks, then the culprit was more likely an assassin than one of the better Omertà enforcers. "Have… actually, I guess I'll talk with Anna later and ask if we had any visits by anyone from the Todd Famiglia the last few nights."

Her sister paused in assembling everything she would need for her post-exercise shower, giving her a strange look over her barred and tattooed shoulder. "The who?"

"I bargained with Viper to get myself a couple dossiers on the groups around here. The Todds are basically hired killers, without the charm of actual Mafiosi hitmen." Of course, she was using the term 'charm' lightly here. "They're more west than north of us, but thereabouts."

They were basically a clan without the brotherhood, and almost unrecognizable in consequence. Networked, of course, and entirely willing to do another's dirty work for the right price… but more like one of those kiddy gangs between syndicates back home than a 'Vongola' typed famiglia with the structure to go with it.

All that considered, it wasn't unlikely someone was testing how firmly she wanted to hold onto this little seaside town. In fact, it was damn likely some guy just got popped because she was being tested.

…that was fucking horrible, actually. Poor guy.

Even more, she had to consider her previous arrangements with Tyr and keep in mind that one faction of assassins might not appreciate that she was dealing with more southern types probably attempting to horn in on their 'backyard'… and she was enabling it.

Plastering a hand over her face, Sonya blew out a sigh. "Shit… well, it was nice while it lasted."
"And so it begins." Tatiana agreed brightly, backtracking just long enough to give her a brief but kind of sweaty hug in sympathy. "It could be worse, they could've tried for the parents of the kids you have here."

It was debatable if Adrik's presence as a guard or his preparations had anything to do with discouraging anything, but maybe. This might or might not have anything to do with the invitation Verde got for some egg-head thing or been done with the intent of matching up 'disasters' to fluster her.

"It'll be good for old man Yaozu's business, at least." Allowed the younger thief wryly as she dropped her hand back to her side, then very nearly stepped on the so-far silent Alek attempting to sneak up behind her for whatever reason. "And his neighborhood watch thing, once he opens his doors."

"Is he still quibbling over whether or not to critique our Fut Gar styles?"

"Me? Hell no. You? He's wavering over." When her sister poked her head out of the bathroom to give her a frankly bewildered look, Sonya attempted for a smirk. She feared it rather fell flat. "You're a nurse. You heal."

Tatiana snickered as she disappeared behind the door again. "...that is adorable. How does someone that old remain that innocent?"

Given the shower in her frankly extravagant bathroom started up in the next second, any reply she might've made would've been lost to the noise of rushing water.

A bunch of murderous thugs poking at her could only really be answered one way, as just intimidation would not work unless a minor miracle happened. Disgusted or not with a completely unconnected murder being used to 'test her', the Storm-Cloud gave a second to be mildly irked there weren't any career killers free and near she could pass the bloody work off to.

Other than Cesare, but Cesare had work to do.

She might be a killer, but she didn't really want to be. Not that anyone, either here in Italy or even back home in Moscow, was willing to let her not be one.

…well, she could not. Then whatever happened to her residents would entirely be her fault for not getting on top of threats, if it wasn't something a bit of Sun Flames or a bit of violence could solve.

Her puppy decided to stare up at her in question, likely wondering why she was sighing into an empty room when there was nothing interesting going on anymore. Yet again the dratted animal was between her damn boots, which didn't really help her current preoccupation of trying not to step on her pet.

"I wonder if the two of you are somehow brain damaged. Marco will gleefully greet any old human, probably even one intending on snapping his neck. You seem to want to be stepped on today."

Her answer was a furiously wagging tail as he delighted in her attention per usual… which didn't really contradict anything she was wondering.

Checking her wristwatch, she sighed again and figured that was pretty much all the morning gone already. Shamal and Zinaida should be back from the Cavallone Famiglia ranch within the hour, and while she could read when the brat was home the kid would inevitably interrupt with some idea or another that he wanted her to do with him.
More likely, she should probably gather the things to hit the beach. It had been a few days, brat might just want a dip to cool off this afternoon and it would tire out the dogs nicely for this evening. She could bring a book too, so the whole day wouldn't be a complete loss.

(Tuesday the 4th of August, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

"I," Björn insisted sourly as he sorted paperwork to include another two or three acquisition accounts and where he might pull the money to fill them from, "am fifteen. How did I become responsible for all of this?"

"You started it by following my ass, take responsibility." His Lady demanded blandly from the other end of the line, sounding honestly bored of talking to him already. It was one of those rare times when she reported in on the rare evenings Maximillian took off for his family, which meant they could discuss some more business-side related news. "Was there an actual reason you want me to hang on?"

Twitching slightly, usually Sonya's nonchalant attitude was usually easy to work with but it could be highly aggravating some handful of times. Mostly when actual fucking contracts were in hand. He slowly pulled the handful of papers over, so he could read off the information as she would probably ask for it. "Your book sold out."

"...what?"

"One of the books you had me publish for you, the 'bait book', sold out. As a matter of fact, Dama, there was a bidding war which drove up demand when other markets took notice. The bidders weren't exactly professionals as they accidently drove up the price by not keeping rumor to a minimum while bidding."

"What?"

"Between some buyer in America and one in the Asian markets, for the very first copy off the presses." Björn continued mercilessly, attempting to pull off her unbothered tones and probably failing a little bit. "You now have a legitimate income to tax because there's going to be a hastily done reprinting to satisfy demand, and with the contract we have with the publisher that means we get almost forty percent of the gross profit from it."

His boss opted to remain silent, if he knew her at all she was probably giving the phone receiver in her hand a strange look as she attempted to absorb what he was telling her.

"Furthermore someone, more than likely the publishing house we went through, let the news of the second volume leak. So there's been demand for that already… and said publisher would very much like to know when you will be sending that one in for them to print off."

"...how, the fuck, did that happen?" Demanded his Lady shortly, as with most new things getting immediately irritated when she didn't understand right away.

"You did spend a few weeks in America teaching a class, Dama. Then there was that tournament you participated in. Both of which were events you were not particularly quiet about." When his answer was only a judgmental sniff, Björn patiently continued. "And then, there were those two Balls in Italy. The interests from our side of the world leaked into the other… meaning a small but growing number of people now know your non-de plume."

She grumbled a bit indistinctly, then huffed in disgust. "I guess I am very much not anonymous
"...f*ck. It wasn't supposed to be that popular. Just something to explain away a claim of 'author'."

He set aside the notes and letters their publishing house sent him. "It's not, if it's any consolation. It was just unusual interest that couldn't be explained adequately artificially inflating demand for a while. The contents and meaning hold next to no value against that."

"Yeah, thanks. Not really helping much, are you?" A sigh, some solid noise he wasn't putting past being a thump of a forehead against something like wood, and only after thinking for a couple seconds more did she continue. "Fuck, whatever. Maybe it'll go away if I ignore it long enough. I need you to arrange a few things for the next few weeks... or whenever I get around to it."

"...Dama?"

Sonya snorted softly before she continued. "You recall Hawk, right?"

Björn had to seriously think about it, and apparently was taking way too long trying to rack his mind for her.

"The guy I picked up from Viper."

"...ah?" The extra ticket, before the extras of an entire small family for young Larion the Rain? "I believe I know who you're speaking of."

"Right, him. I need something, not here, for him to do when I go back to work."

Her Lackey blanked out on anything remotely helpful to offer. "...doing what?"

"Anything else that means I don't have to have someone so unknown even he doesn't know what he's capable of behind me." She hummed a moment, forestalling his other question about how he was responsible for finding this man more or other work. "After I take him up to France for a day or two. I'm also going to need you for that one too, and anything you can think of to keep a former civilian law enforcement agent from actually finding something to hold against us if I have him search out Hawk's past history in his side of the world. Hawk can't find anything remotely familiar, Viper struck out well beforehand, so the last thing to do is forge him some identification that can stand up to anything that could happen in the future... like a bit of his past coming due."

"...okay, and-"

"And then, Verde's got some egghead convention to go to. He needs contracts to cover Omertà that other eggheads can respect and maybe a few to cover whatever people put scientists under contract for... and maybe a bodyguard. I'll be going, but who knows what kind of bullshit is being pulled here."

He pursed his lips, a small suspicion building. "And then-?"

"Then, I need another nom-de plume for the history text. Completely and totally divorced from my current aliases. And, as my sister is kind of retired from doing it and my mother definitely is, I might as well get a few alternate identifications crafted professionally until I can establish better ones myself. Which means I need you to set it up before the end of the month."

...point to his Lady. Passive-aggressive bitchiness was apparently something she could pull off a hell
of a lot better than he could. Then again, she was the boss.

"Anything else?" Jolting down the entirety of other aims he now had to do, which was a semi-impressive monthly laundry list he would have to slightly scramble to start beginning with the end and working his way up it, he started mentally plotting out his next few days to get the long-term concerns started as quickly as possible.

"That old-timer. The guy you had deliver my traveler's cheques by. He still alive?"

Bjørn blinked blankly at his rather untidy desk, not really seeing his pad of note paper as he strained his memory to recall the incident and who he had sent to her. "I can find out."

He had the name and service number somewhere, he made specific note of it so it might be in the pile of paperwork in the desk's drawers… or wherever he emptied out his pockets that day.

"He'd know what to look for as one of Verde's bodyguards, so then he can teach Hawk in the moment instead of leaving everything up to Adrik to cram into his head before the event-thing." Sonya sounded rather pleased with knitting those two likely absent-minded thoughts together while he leafed through his old paperwork pending rewriting for archiving, which also heaped upon him a rather interesting set of meetings to get through to her expectations.

He had to be the one to convince the old-timer that the job was legit and wasn't intended to kill him first… while also protecting his Lady's interests enough the vet wouldn't be able to use anything he learned against her or them.

…perhaps he should remember what he could do in revenge to other clients were not things he could do to his patron in this lifestyle. Tyr the Sword Emperor was one thing, she was entirely different and up there with Viper in making him regret things deeply for even minor infractions.

"Garrett McCarthy." Bjørn read off from a scrap of paper that looked to come from the pad he kept in his breast suit pocket for scraps of information like this, earning himself a short stint of silence from her.

"…who?"

"The man you wanted me to speak with, Dama. The veteran around here we used before."

She hummed, somehow making it sound thoughtful instead of patronizing. "Then I guess you have a lot of paperwork to do."

Yes, yes he did.

(Thursday the 13th of August, 1970. Yaozu's Dojo, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Cracking open the small crate liberally plastered with 'fragile!' warning decals using the crowbar he had brought down from the castle’s store of random tools, Yaozu wrenched the wooden lid off to clatter to the floor with a sharp jerk of the metal and then delicately brushed some of the flattened straw padding the contents to the side. Revealing the top few of a set of fourteen hard to acquire mirrors he had liberally traded on Fēng's willingly given assistance to find.

Mingxia peered over his elbow, then glanced at him worriedly. "I don't get it, sifu. How are these to help?"
Plucking somewhat irritably at his strange western style 'shirt tails', he pulled a slight bit of slack in the sturdy cotton to polish one of the topmost mirrors. "Watch, little Ming."

The mirrors were very much unremarkable circles of reflective bronze to all appearances, that was the point of them. It was only when they reflected did they turn into something less ordinary than simple polished metal circles, an old trick he had nearly forgotten about until the question of how to suitably hide his knowledge so his students could find it if need be was raised.

"These," he informed the young Rain pointedly as he aimed the surprisingly detailed reflection to hit the polished wooden floor they had finished last week, "are t'ou kuand ching. I know you do not know much of our history, Ming, so I do not fault you for not knowing of them. They were used to signal to one another safe places for various aims, from the worship of Christianity when it was banned in Japan to even for noble use in displays of wealth in the steppes of Mongolia. For a long time, the secret of crafting these mirrors were recorded in a book that was long lost to us."

Reflecting off the highly polished mirror he was holding was the slightly blurry image of a tongue of fire and the traditional Chinese characters spelling out 'Lightning'. A signal that he was aware of Lightning Flames, that was both hidden and obvious if he needed it at the right… or wrong, moment.

Yaozu might be forced to obey a code of silence not his own for his own protection, but that did not mean he had to be equally as oblique when the rule of 'hidden' was satisfied. Miss Bazanova had seemed skeptical of the mirrors' purposes but uninterested in preventing his acquisition when he proposed this way to signal his involvement in the use of Dying Will Flame use, only suggesting he also acquire the 'of Earth' set of designs to go with.

That she could not answer what types the of Earth Flames were did slightly upset those plans, but he had been satisfied when she offered to inform him as soon as she knew. As he didn't know much beyond just 'Earth', he had opted for just two sets of the 'Sky' mirrors for the time being.

"…if the art was lost, then how do you possess these?"

"A western scientist eventually unlocked the secret of etching in even what seems to be an unblemished surface and returned the technique to us." For a bare handful of decades, then the current troubles started and all those that knew how to reproduce the 'magic mirrors' stopped advertising that they could do so.

He was lucky enough to recall an old fellow student to his third-to-last master who had eventually left the life of a martial artist behind to pursue a life as a craftsman instead, who proved not entirely hostile to her brother's inquiries about if he could make the mirrors for him. Yaozu was not going to ask how that interaction had gone, merely trusting his former student would not embarrass him.

Or if he had, then trusting that he had a good reason to embarrass him so.

Mingxia sat back, flicking red eyes from the unmarred mirror's surface to the distinct glowing reflection gleaming on the floorboards and then up to his own. "Sifu… is this safe?"

Yaozu knew why she worried, and that helped him not take offense to her questioning him in this matter. He was equally as concerned to avoid coming to the attention of apparently even more supernatural enforcers of a code of silence policing a fraction of man able to use some supernatural abilities of their own.

"It will depend on who young Usov and Miss Anna allow through enough to see them." He wasn't quite as comforted by the thought as she was, he had less reason to trust in the 'Mists' than he did in a Cloud's strength of arm or stilted charisma. "But I spoke with Miss Bazanova, and she said nothing
against the use of these mirrors."

"They are very clever." Mused the equally young Rain, peering into the opened crate at his far side and the thirteen other mirrors waiting to be pulled out and hung up. "Do you think these will work in place of a wall of mirrors?"

"I will be getting one, the installation will be this weekend once the glass order arrives. However one wall will only show one side of a situation, these will not only signal to students needing more than I can admit to but also be placed in blind spots around this floor." Fishing a ball of twine from the shopping bag the girl had brought with her before meeting with him, he settled in to craft a thin rope strong enough to support the heavy metal mirrors for later placement along the walls.

Yaozu was intending to place them either upon the front wall or close to it as he could, that way they would only reveal their hidden images when the late afternoon sun struck the yet to be installed mirror wall and reflected strong enough light back to the mirrors to show the etchings. Until such possibly rare times, he had to wait to see how well the positions worked and if he would move them only once it was tested, they would be obviously just for him to spot any mischief or bad posture among any students.

Indeed, they would be also as useful for that aim as the one he originally approached this idea with.

The spool of rough string was taken from him as soon as he had a decent length, the young teenager confidently copying him in creating a netting to hold the bronze mirrors up. They worked silently for most of the morning, a familiar chore in an unfamiliar land providing what he hoped was a small sense of home for them both. Several nights were spent together with him teaching her how to mend a few things that could be found around a household.

"I am glad you seem to be feeling more settled, sifu. It is not healthy to remain indoors all day for weeks."

The elderly man had more than enough self-control to not grimace at the reminder of the last few months upon moving to this part of the world. "I believe I look forward to the times Miss Bazanova is not in residence. Then Master Assassins will likely not visit for some time."

Mingxia coughed sheepishly, winding clever fingers into the twine aimlessly and ruining the last ten minutes of work she had gotten through. "I believe he might be moving in either at the end of the western calendar or the start of the New Year. Across the mountainside, with his... group. Of likeminded... agents."

He glanced at her and sighed when nothing teasing was given away by her avoidance of his gaze. "...as long as they stay out of my dojo, I will not mind. Much."

Picking up the bronzed mirror from his lap, he wove the net of twine around the hidden catch edges to hold the weight aloft as he needed them to.

"Do you feel better about this, at least?" Inquired Mingxia softly, slowly and methodically mending the damage she did in a moment of inattention instead of getting flustered with the mistake and making it worse with haste. "I know this was not what you planned on... especially not even speaking to big brother."

"No one knows what the future holds for anyone, much less for themselves." He informed her pointedly, knotting the twine to hold everything together and not fall once hung up. "As you could likely not have claimed to always be aware you would follow a westerner outside of China's borders to seek your dreams on your own terms, I cannot say I expected to end up here... but I am and
therefore I will make the best of it."

She selected one of the plain bronzed mirrors to secure with her netting, frowning faintly. "It cannot be easy to leave one's homeland at the end of your life."

"Equally, it cannot be easy to leave all you know before you can really live."

Mingxia blinked back at him reprovingly as she knotted off her mirror. "I am not an old man long since set in my ways."

He sniffed, but the truth just was and so he didn't take offense. He merely started unwinding another length of twine to secure another mirror. "I am not a young girl seeking my own way in life somewhere I do not know."

The teenager, and it was not entirely hard to forget how young she really was sometimes, sniffed imperiously she had very obviously learned from the fiery Tatiana Primakova. "When do you think you will open the dojo, sifu?"

"In time. There is no rush." He could afford to wait until everything was done, unlike how he had to open his first school in his father's backyard before he could acquire the sum to purchase his own building. "Likely before the end of the month, if not sooner. So then, little Ming, are you doing better now as well?"

She nodded slowly, pursing her lips and giving his question serious enough thought. "There were a few days there I didn't know what possessed me to ask Miss Sonya to help me. Russia wasn't particularly hard, I had you and her family was very understanding... but here was completely different."

"There were others from our homeland in Moscow, you and I were still one of a few handfuls there."

He pointed out bluntly, but not unkindly. "Here we only have one another, unless my wayward student designs to visit us."

"It will happen more often than you think... as soon as big brother gains the permission somehow out of Miss Sonya." The wry little smirk on her face now spoke exactly how she expected her elder to gain an open invitation to another's home.

Likely, by being as much of an annoying brat as he had been way back when he was just another hotheaded angry young man newly saddled with responsibility to a baby sister he did not know how to care for. Fēng, or Fong as the young man insisted on being addressed as, had a particular talent developed over a hard childhood to be as annoying and as pleasant as humanly possible at the same time.

A talent which he had honed on him irritatively enough, and equally as irritatingly seemed entirely unaware of how aggravating another might see his behavior.

Yaozu didn't feel particularly bad that bad habit of his former student would be centered on their host, the woman wasn't an innocent in much however she was in his currently muddled feelings over the secrets that had been kept from him.

Better her than him.

He finished netting his second mirror, only to watch with amusement as Mingxia fumbled retrieving her second and the metal clanked to the floorboards noisily.

The clumsiness that came with puberty was expected, he had guided several hundred students
through this point in their lives as their reach and balance developed, and thankfully these mirrors were made of solid metal rather than the westerner glass affairs that might've harmed his ward when dropped.

As it was, all the mirror did was put a dent into his dojo's floors rather than cut the girl's fingers up when she snapped out a hand in an unwise attempt to catch a heavy disk of pure bronze.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 13th of August, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"I am not entirely sure if that satisfies our obligation to upholding Omertà."

Sonya plastered a hand over her face, a something that was turning into a habit the more of these little 'minion' things she acquired. "Don't tell me that now, Tyr. I think old man Yaozu is entirely too wedded to the idea to be parted from it easily."

The assassin, annoyingly enough, just blinked at her.

She gave up trying to be remotely productive, because fuck knew she was being piss poor at it this summer. Alek gave a startled yelp to be suddenly hauled up off his paws and into her lap, but her dog eventually got the idea she needed a distraction at hand to fiddle with more than he needed to sniff around the new back patio furniture.

They could only stay out here now that the elevator work was done for the day, and talk frankly because all the civilians were out of the castle. Sonya herself had finally figured out she was entirely too jittery to stick to one project, belatedly catching on to the fact she had been somewhat erratically bouncing from idea to problem to distraction without really making any progress on anything.

Sitting outside seemed to help the rebuilding restlessness that had her running from peak to peak last month, if only a little. The young canine in her lap didn't very often, if only because Alek needed regular walks and exercise to go with regular feeding and bathroom breaks. Basically, he was just more distractions from what she wanted to do and then there was Shamal and Marco who tended to just compound that problem.

If it wasn't for her godson, and the safety of everyone involved, she'd seriously start thinking about heading back to Mafia Land to get on top of her other responsibilities already. She was bored, and almost itching to do more than mere domestic tasks.

It wasn't really the longest she had gone doing nothing productive, but certainty the longest she spent at 'home' without at least planning on a job or some way around her contracts to have more get done with minimal effort. There were things done, and things started, but notably she had just been giving orders and not doing it herself.

"...okay, wait. When I swore to Omertà, it was to keep my work and lifestyle from law enforcement."

She ticked off a finger to help illustrate her point, then waggled two at him. "Then there were the Vindice Laws, but those are more 'no government' than 'no civilians'."

"As did I, however I am not the one you must convince."

"It should be a non-issue." Sonya insisted, only for the damn assassin she had asked to verify there wouldn't be any major problems with the old Chinese man's plans to be completely unhelpful yet again. "The civilians aren't the ones we're hiding from."
"The civilians are not stupid." Tyr insisted back as pointedly from his seat across the little glass patio table. "All it takes is one to speak unwisely to cause an incident you may be required to clean up to keep your elderly martial arts master."

"Yaozu's an old Chinese man, a 'mystic master of martial arts' to boot, and it's a half natural weather phenomenon slash half rainbow motif." She countered equally as pointedly, running the fingers of her left hand through the canine's ruff and earning herself a pleased huff. "Pretty sure 'secret criminal fire-based spiritual ability' will not be anyone's, much less anyone that believes themselves to be logical like most 'detectives', will believe."

Her guest hesitated at that, looking distinctly puzzled for a moment. "You know… I never really thought about it like that."

Shooting him an exasperated look, the thief waved a hand in the air between them. "Tyr, you can literally light a fire with your mind. You collect assassins out of a group of people able to burst into a rainbow of colors at will. How did you miss exactly how ridiculous our abilities really are?"

The older man snorted, managing to make the sound dignified instead of rude. "Overfamiliarity, more than likely. Flames have been part of my life for decades."

"I've still got at least a decade less than you." Rolling her eyes, Sonya slouched slightly to make more lap space for Alek to occupy. Who was a little big to be sitting pretty in her lap now, a bit bewildering since barely a month and a half ago he could almost fit into both hands comfortably. She blamed Cesare.

The dog kibble only lasted approximately three days before the temperamental assassin-chef tossed the lot out claiming the 'mass produced dross' offended every one of his sensibilities to serve even if it was to two dogs that would eat spoiled scraps dug out of the trash just as eagerly. For a solid month now, the canines had been eating just as well if not better than the human residents of the castle and probably a bit more in scraps everyone seemed entirely unable to stop feeding the greedy beasts.

It showed, especially as both had quadrupled in size and were working on yet another few inches to go with another stone or so of weight.

Which then also reminded her that Alek and Marco needed new collars, once they had grown out of the puppy ones bought on the day of their arrival neither she nor Shamal bothered collaring either.

"You are a pain in the ass." Sonya informed her dog, who gazed up at her with innocent doggy trust that all she spoke were sweet nothings he probably wanted to hear more than what she really said. "I need to get you vaccinated and licensed, before the end of the month. Otherwise you'll be keeping your littermate and my godson company this year instead of coming with me."

The dratted thing decided whacking both knees with his whippy banner of a tail was a brilliant idea as his butt hung over one thigh and left the appendage to originally dangle between them, and to be brutally honest it started to hurt after ten or so times.

"What are you going to do about your master martial artist, then?" Tyr inquired politely enough, pretending more interest in refreshing the coffee Cesare had made him even if the man utterly refused to drink any of it.

She held the suspicion he was boiling it off with judicious use of Flames on the sly, just so there was something to refresh. "Nothing."
When he shot her a sharp look, the thief rolled her eyes.

"I have Mists. Yaozu can do whatever he feels is necessary, they'll take care of the rest."

He saluted her or her idea with his coffee cup, sitting back and not entirely managing to covertly give the contents a dubious look. "Why ask me?"

"...well, I would've asked D'Attilio... if the damn man remembered I existed." Alek nosed under a hand, insistent in being rewarded for patiently occupying her lap as she wanted. Absently scratching behind his fluffy ears, she tried not to think about how she would've asked Renato had he still been around. "As it is, Fiorella has... hesitations regarding our secrecy so asking Mrs. Silvery-White isn't exactly easy."

The assassin keeping her company this afternoon set down his cup with a slight clink of china against glass. "In wishing to keep up with your investigations of disembodied Mist threats, I did look into Instructor D'Attilio's present duties. As I had theorized, he is currently involved with cleaning up a minor incident between three famiglias and a disputed Cloud foundling."

Sonya raised an eyebrow but had to give the Mafia School instructor his dues for getting entangled in that mess. "Better him than me."

Shamal, after noisily banging the back doors against the brickwork behind them, puffed hard from his probable running down staircases and glared at them both. "Now my room is clean, mamma."

"Mmhm... did you clean Luigi's cage? Should I check now?"

Her brat glared, grumbled something indistinct she probably should let go without asking about, and snagged the door in his Flames to slam close behind him before his poor puppy could manage to sneak out to join them.

Tyr glanced over at her curiously, and she just had to smirk. "Eventually he'll recall he's a Mist and can do this all instantly if there's really something that damn important pending... but for now he's expecting me to take him for gelato for helping the maids clean his bathroom after Marco had a bit of an accident last night. He was rather put out I checked his room earlier before you showed up, and then he was very shocked I poked into the corners and under his bed when you showed up as I asked."

"Specifically flustering your godson?"

"Flustering a person makes them react stupidly and with unseemly haste. Especially if you can be entirely innocent when pulling it off. Not even Flame users are immune to that facet of human nature. Hence why he's not thought of using his Flames to do whatever it is he had against me speaking to adult men." Alek whined pitifully when she stopped petting him, slithering down to the bricks of the patio obediently when she pulled herself upright and he lost his seat. He shook out his fur as he adjusted being back on his paws while she picked pale strands of fur off her jeans. "The more experience he has with it, the less he might do something stupid he will regret later."

He blinked at her slowly, then a confusingly wry little smirk crossed his face. "I see..."

"He will make me uphold my end of that, so I will need to leave shortly. I'm running out of things to tag onto 'clean your room'."

The master assassin inclined his head, rising to his feet. "I have already tarried overly longer than I meant to, myself. As per usual, speaking with you is equally informative and interesting. I thank you for the time you've spared me."
"Thank you for checking into that situation for me, even if that just meant the precautions I had ready were necessary." Sonya returned obediently to the formula of social niceties, a tiny touch confused as the man didn't often bother with saying goodbye. "Have a good day, Master Tyr."

Alek very pointedly skirted around the man, quivering his nose as the assassin she could now positively identify as a Sky even with his almost paranoid caution against using his Flames openly passed him.

Then the animal sneezed loudly, giving her an unreadable look through his blue eye.

"Fuck you, I'll keep whatever company I want." Her dog looked adorably confused when she stuck her tongue out at him to punctuate the statement, more than likely wondering what that might mean coming from her.

Asshole, he stuck out his tongue at her almost every day.

Shamal, apparently having utterly enough of being run around like a farm fowl that had been recently beheaded, jumped out of a second story window and bounced off the fencing around the garden plot to a stop next to her. "I'm really done now, mamma… what are you doing?"

"Nothing." Pushing up to her boots, Sonya snagged her purse from the patio table and hooked it over a shoulder. "Let's go then. Bring Marco, we need to get them new collars."

(Saturday the 15th of August, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Scruffy examined the molded metal tray that was the result of three days' worth of engineering calculations and beating on said metal plate with a hammer only to get bitched out when he hammered something a micro measure too much, then started clamping it down to the heat-resistant surface he was 'renting'. "Well, here goes nothing then."

Verde looked highly unimpressed with his blasé comment. "Apologies for attempting to reduce the waste glass that results from cutting the scales."

"I did not say anything against you, Verde. There was little else to do while we worked out the kinks in the next glass mix recipe, so the effort is entirely appreciated." Especially if they were to meet the scientist's self-imposed goal of sending Sonya off this month with a complete set of arm and leg guards.

Cutting the fiddly drips of glass was a pain in his ass, and this would at least have things in the right general shape before he pressed them against a grinding table to finish the glass armor scales.

At least now they had more than enough of the spider silk string to be doubly sure that everything would hold together even if the glass cracked a handful of false jewels again.

Taking the protective gear off the nearby brand-new work bench, basically a pair of padded heavy leather gloves and a welding mask, the Sun pulled everything on and the blacksmith's apron hanging from a hook before carefully opening the ominously glowering glass forge.

The Lightning standing by to observe how well their makeshift form tray worked handed him the tongs he then used to carefully pull the crucible of molten glass out of the forge. Three steps back, two to the side, and he equally as carefully poured a tiny bit of the glowing hot mix into the waiting divots in the metal tray until the heavy ceramic canister was as empty as it would get.
There were a couple waste drops, Scruffy was only human and under this much leather and padding even a Sun could start sweating enough to foul any grip and blind oneself. A few overspills that might be cut away with a sacrificial pair of wire cutters once things cooled down enough ruined his attempt at pouring uniformed measures into each depression, but there were now thirty pebble-sized and roughly shaped teardrop beads of the molten yellow glowing glass.

…they would only find out what color this batch was when it finally cooled enough. Given their proposed light purple/Cloud mix had turned out sea-green, there was no real way to tell even from the chemical composition. However, now that they were approximately uniform in size the glass dollops should all be cool enough to work with at the same time.

"Think this will work?" He inquired from his lab-mate once he peeled off the heaviest parts of his heat protection.

"I refuse to speculate." Scoffed the Frenchman sourly, giving him a dirty look before stalking off to his corner of the first basement level laboratory he had paid to be built.

Scruffy sighed, absently stripping off his gloves and frowning at the burned thumb.

These were a new pair…

…and there was a burn hole in the thumb. That went all the way through.

Checking his hands next, he hesitantly brushed the smudge of ash off a thumbnail. "…Verde?"

"What?"

"…are Flame users immune to heat?"

The scientist's glasses flashed under the fluorescent glare of the lab lights as he glanced over a shoulder. "Of course we are. Otherwise it would not be possible to hold a palm full of one's Flames in a hand."

"Any heat sources?" He pressed uneasily, relieved he hadn't burned his left thumb to the point of disfigurement but unsure if he fully understood the ramifications of not needing protective gear to handle something approaching almost two thousand degrees Celsius.

Easily three thousand in Fahrenheit.

"…Scruffy, may I point out to you that you are a fair-skinned man." Verde suddenly started jarringly off-topic pointedly, turning back to his own work with restless movements. "Who had been held in bondage for some measure of time approaching, by your own educated guess, a decade in an environment often described as a tropical or intertropical climate. How then did you not burn red to the point of being leathery brown, and instead remain mainly undamaged from excessive sun exposure with just a deep tan that is fading even now?"

He turned around to aim a pointed frown at his lab mate's back. "Can I handle molten glass with my bare hands?"

"Theoretically."

"…not so theoretically now, Verde. Part of the gloves charred away, and something hit my thumbnail… but there's no damage."

Suddenly abandoning whatever he had going with the culture dishes and specimen cages set up over
there, the green-haired man swiftly had Scruffy's hands placed on his work bench. A few feet from
the cooling glass drips, but still clearly displayed to inspect for any heat warping in flesh.

The scientist blinked at the tanned skin, nonplussed at the smear of ash on one thumb that was all that
was shown. "...intriguing."

"I'm not reaching in there and scraping out the waste glass with my bare hands."

"Of course not. That would be hasty and ill-thought out, when we can systematically approach
testing this immunity to find the extreme edges of tolerance instead." Smirking somehow evilly, he
released Scruffy's hands and wandered back to his side of the lab in aims of writing materials given
which pile of supplies he was generally aiming for. "As a matter of fact, we could outsource this
particular experiment if you feel unsettled by it."

"I... didn't say that."

"Nonsense." Dismissed the younger man swiftly, writing something out in his cramped handwriting
for badgering someone later with. "Your glancing brush with losing your hands have obviously
rattled your nerves. It would be the least I can arrange to assist you as part of my equipment failed to
protect you as required by safety regulations."

...he had the sinking suspicion Verde had multiple, evil, scientific plans for this discovery. He was
also pretty sure he didn't want to get involved, as the other man was very obviously angling for.

Scruffy reluctantly concluded it wasn't his business. Very reluctantly.

It had nothing to do with how his lab partner started snickering evilly to himself as he wrote
whatever out, and the wide if somewhat razor thin smirk on the younger man's face. Mostly, it had to
do with remembering Cesare had caved and stocked some beer somewhere for the Russian fathers
and wanting a few bottles of that before getting on with his work down here.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 15th of August, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa,
Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Can I ask a question?"

"You just did, pipsqueak. However, as I am a magnanimous man, you certainly may ask another if
you wish." The disgusted crinkle of a nose was not nearly as satisfying as the darkly disgusted look
Renato would've pinned him with for that, but Cesare would take it.

The child very obviously rethought asking him his question, but eventually he gave a petulant sigh
before posing it. "Why a chef?"

Pausing, both hands still dug into the meat mix he had made up to make meatballs with, he gave the
little Mist at his side a questioning look. "Why so interested?"

Shamal nibbled on a baguette slice to buy himself a few seconds, likely to order his thoughts much
like his godfather would if he asked a moment before being utterly sure of which questions he could
afford to ask.

The resemblance, even if it was not based in any physical feature, hurt less and less the more Cesare
saw of this child unconsciously copying a habit of a Mafioso that had a strong presence in his life up
to a few short weeks ago.
Less, but still a sore happening.

"Mister Renato is... was, a hitman because he didn't like how scruffy detectives looked." Glowering as he forcibly corrected himself, the child restlessly tore a bit of his bread off to feed his hulking young canine a tiny bit of crust so he didn't have to show if he teared up any or not. "Mamma is a thief, and she likes to read so she also writes a few books. Zia likes to heal, but she's Sunny like that. Zio is a 'adrenaline junky' so he shows off... according to mamma."

...did Renato really claim that?

Stubbornly pressing his mouth flat against a highly amused smirk as he slowly rolled a palmful of meat around to shape them into balls Cesare started methodically working through his bowl of breadcrumbs, seasoned raw ground meat, and one fresh egg. "Well... I didn't start cooking because I enjoyed it."

They all had been burned a few too many times to feel comfortable about talking of their early years, even the smallest details needed to properly tell a story might reveal a habit of one of the others so it was just easier to deny and lie instead when asked. Shamal was asking about his history, and the only other one that might be impacted by sharing was already gone as it was...

"You realize your godfather was a beast of a Sun, yes?" Checked the Mafioso first, smirking tiredly at the pointedly irked look he got drilled into the underside of his jaw in return. "Recall how much your zia eats to soothe Lady Vongola every night, child. Then put that together with 'not even a quarter' of the Sun he was."

Shamal frowned as he obediently thought, then the little crease between his brows got deeper as he wondered.

"We weren't... exactly rolling in excess funds." Cesare allowed, only a tiny bit bitterly for how many years had passed since then had dulled the indignity. "Some nights, we were lucky to eat at all. Renato's abilities, when he sourly consented to use his glittery gold Flames, kept us mostly in one general piece but we didn't really understand the price until... well, he stretched it a bit too far one particularly messy afternoon."

The Mist squinted at him, ignoring that his pet was trying to snag the rest of the bread out of his hands and only being foiled because the scrap of baguette wavered in and out of reality as needed. "Suns need to eat to heal."

"I understand that now, yes." That Tatiana felt no hesitation asking him for more to eat when she felt the need was a credit to how well she was raised, or for how well she was informed. Almost absently placing the last meatball in place on the pan, he discarded the bowl into the sink on his side of the kitchen and turned on the water to wash not only the glass bowl but his hands. "We didn't at the time."

Cesare always did kind of wonder if Renato's disinclination to heal others was based more in half remembered stomach pangs of slowly starving himself to death rather than just being more suited to killing instead of healing. Passing out from said starvation after preventing a rather agonizing death from happening might not have helped much either.

"I started to cook because it was practical. Stretched out our supplies just a tiny bit more to cover those 'small expenditures of energy'." Then it also let him ensure Renato actually fucking ate enough for a Sun Flame user since the brat would only steal what he needed from the others' plates if there was enough to go around.
He resorted to forcing on the baby hitman raw tomatoes garnished with salt more than he was comfortable admitting to, if only because stealing a few tomatoes from a backyard or rooftop garden and getting salt from the sea was simple enough if you knew how to go about it. At least the Mafioso had developed a taste for them instead of hating the very sight, although an Italian that didn't like tomatoes would be a very pitiful one indeed.

"So... to be useful?"

The assassin barked a laugh, grinning as he turned to the child with clean hands to flick water at him. "I was already useful, rapscallion. Renato had ideas about what kind of man he would be, getting Lando and the others to follow like the little charismatic bastard he really was. I, and Natalia, had less... morals or lofty expectations for life. We'd take any job, the others followed Mafiosi laws to the very letter. Together we just... had a little more than the average gutter rat might at the end of the night."

Shamal gave him a decidedly unimpressed look for the assault of water droplets, reaching out and getting a whole globe of water to nestle in his palm with a pointedly arched look of expectation.

Cesare reached an entire hand into the sink and cupped the dishwater in his mixing bowl with a challenging arch of an eyebrow and a wide grin.

The child considered it but gave in with a rude sound as he splashed the water into the dogs' water bowl instead of at the Mafioso.

"Because it was needed, and I could fit the need." He allowed when the child looked to be ready to slip off for the day. Earning himself a faintly sceptical look. "Why I started cooking, child. I was the only one who knew anything about how to cook, so I started making everything we ate. Taught most of the others, as well."

Slowly nodding, the young Mist glanced up a touch wetly. "Mister Renato made good lasagna."

"He did. The asshole never did tell me which spices he put into it. And after I taught him to make it, too."

Shamal thought hard for a second, slowly reseating himself at the kitchen island counter instead of scampering off for a free afternoon of summer vacation. "I think he taught mamma how he made it. She only burnt a corner, but it was just as good as his."

"Oh ho?" That little tidbit was priceless. Cesare needed to speak with his 'not-friend's' godchild more often. "Do you think she remembers the spices he uses?"
Ramiro Loggia, born October first in the year 1928 and died just two weeks ago. A lifelong fisherman who spent most of his years on the ocean catching the fish he then sold in the evenings before going home to a house his father owned before him and his grandfather before him. No family left, or rather no close family within two generations, no angry ex-wife or disgruntled frenemy to regret.

The Polizia Provinciale and the Polizia Municipale, basically every law enforcement agency that had any kind of jurisdiction in the little comune, were left scratching their heads trying to find any motive to why this particular man was suddenly dead. From their perspective and what they could reach, no one had anything to gain from his death.

Not revenge, no great amount of money at stake to inherit or be stolen, not a sudden crime of passion given he was pretty much a die-hard bachelor. Background checks turned up nothing, the man had more friends than acquaintances with the other fishermen and a few of the shopkeepers, and no known enemies of the level needed to explain a spontaneous homicide.

Sonya, on the other hand, had a very good idea why the man was dead. Because she parked her ass not a kilometer north of where the man lived his whole life, and he was so conveniently alone at the right times to make an easy target.

Anna and Adrik, once alerted for what to look for, managed to track back the man's routine to a gloomy Wednesday night when he met a particularly slick crook while drinking a couple glasses of wine. A bit more liberation than he was used to had him chatting up the shady character a bit more freely than wise, and likely explained how he was picked over anyone else in the village.

Her current head of security, leaning a bit heavily on the Mirror Lady's assistance to shore up his medical issues and give him the range to teach her how to do it, also managed to locate where the assassin had holed up to wait out any interests in his person. A bit further out to sea, where she couldn't exactly claim infringement and they could get closer than she really liked anyone getting.

…the only problem, for him, was there were only three churches in Moneglia. Like any good Italian, their trouble making assassin attended Mass just like everyone else in Italy.

Which would be technically infringement of a Cloud's home territory and no one would be very surprised if she retaliated then. As such, she could maybe catch this particular asshole out of his hidey-hole when he attempted to leave whichever church he attended today or tail him back to his bolthole.

Delicate child fingers curled into her sleeve, as Shamal tugged on it to gain her attention. "Stop smirking, mamma. You're scaring people."

"Am I?" She was attracting a slight bit of attention from those sitting on their bench with them, likely for being lost in her own thoughts while waiting out this Mass service, but no one seemed very alarmed just yet.

The Mist blinked up at her oh so innocently, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Proud of his little fib, which did attract attention as needed but without unduly alarming either her or anyone else, the
thief tugged lightly on his floppy and wavy bangs teasingly then tucked him more firmly into her side.

Attending church didn't magically stop being awkward for her, but the more often she attended Sunday Mass with Shamal the less out of place she felt now she had some idea of how it was conducted. Either a case of familiarity breeding ease or just her adjusting, but every now and again something happened that made her incredibly uncomfortable.

Like the pastor asking his congregation for a moment of prayer for their recently murdered fellow that she could very well be blamed for.

Sonya bowed her head with the rest of the crowd packing this church full but didn't press her hands together or raise them up. Earning herself a disgusted if quiet huff from her left.

It was inevitable someone would notice she didn't take Communion nor do much aside kneel, stand, or sit when asked by the pastor. She didn't sing the hymns, do anything but think when asked to pray for whatever, and generally just boredly waited out the hour and a half or so it took for Mass to conclude. The 'Catholic in good standing' sitting next to her could at least do her the favor of being judgmental silently if she really must be so.

The arm she had around Shamal, who did have 'proper Catholic position' in holding up his folded together hands in prayer as asked like everyone else, kept her bratty Mist in place instead of letting him try to get her some on the spot revenge for their neighbor's obvious disapproval.

Hopefully introducing her 'Beast Mistress' to Felixa's mother would bear some fruit soon and smooth over this bump without her involvement. Zinaida had been invited to swap some of her mead for more spices to brew it with once she had something set up, so she was assuming that whole thing was going well.

Cesare had done the bulk of work in smoothing over any future concerns about the mainly atheist ranks of the Russians to this community of die-hard Catholics by offering the true but not actually applicable 'any public worship is heavily discouraged in Soviet Russia' factoid to any who asked. Half the reason she paid him to do it right there, what a native Italian said to another Italian would be believed more than what one of the Russians tried to claim.

When the gossip made the rounds that true-but-not-really rumor would hopefully join up with whatever this biddy of a bitch would spread around, and someone would equally as hopefully assume she just wasn't comfortable with publicly held worship instead of being completely not a Catholic instead. All without her having to have a likely insensitive conversation about religious faith and her lack of any to someone who had it and considered it a fact of life.

Either way it resolved itself, she kind of needed to give that letter to a priest here to formally introduce Shamal into this congregation. It was the one they visited more often, simply because it looked like a church and she could easily find it by scanning the roofline of the comune.

Not just simply because she kept getting lost trying to regularly visit any of the others… but that did help contribute to her decision too.

More importantly than anything else, Shamal seemed to like attending Mass in this one better.

It might have a little to do with a few of the maids being members here. Cesare had poked at her brat about maybe having a crush on one of them last night before dinner and as good as the kid was getting, he wasn't skilled enough to lie in the face of a professional thief or a Mafioso assassin and get away with it. Now she just had to figure out which one of the teenaged girls he was sweet on,
Shamal was all sorts of helpful to the maids in general not just one or two.

Unlike how he was to Larion's father, Verde, or even Scruffy if the Sun hesitantly asked him a question. Or the Mafioso in her kitchen, as hesitantly fascinated as the kid was in asking questions about Renato's earlier years and not being immediately shut down or neatly distracted from it.

If she could she'd assign that maid to the second floor alone, just so he'd be on top of keeping his room clean without her having to remind him.

Sonya only let go of Shamal the moment Communion was started, still a little confused if the wafers and wine was supposed to be symbolic of the 'Last Supper' or the pretend bits of flesh and blood of their religious icon. She had been told it was the former more, but the wording as the congregation was invited up still kind of sounded otherwise. Instead of getting up with him to stand near the wall until he returned, she checked the book currently stored in her purse for a letter she was faintly sure was there.

From a handful of times attending Mass here, she knew Communion was kind of an endpoint. Mass should finally end once everyone had a 'taste of their Savoir', or whatever the hell that shit was supposed to stand for, then hopefully introducing her brat to the pastor would take a bit less time. Then she'd have the rest of the morning to help Anna make that delinquent assassin's life hell until they herded him out of the village or killed him.

Whichever came first, honestly. She wasn't too fussed given the whole reason the man was here was to kill one of her poor, ignorant villagers.

The thief gave her godson a smirk when he eventually trotted back to her, earning herself a pointedly admonishing look before the brat seated his little butt on their pew.

…she was perfectly behaving herself. Honest. Staying here this time had nothing to do with showcasing to that judgmental bitch she didn't fucking care what the biddy thought of her non-actions.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 16th of August, 1970. Oratory of the Disciplinary, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Although, technically, my superior would be the one to receive this and fold you into our flock. As he is on sabbatical seeking clarification on a matter of local interest from our superiors in Genoa, I instead welcome you both to the Oratory of the Disciplinary in his place." Enthused Deacon Baresi pleasantly enough, tucking the letter she had gotten passed on from Shamal's previous priest into a pocket of his long black jacket-thing.

It was priest-garb, Sonya never really expected to need to know what those robes were called. It looked entirely too hot for this climate, though.

"Right… thanks?" Tried the Russian native warily, utterly uncomfortable while out of her depths and damning Renato to hell and back for leaving her to flounder through this alone.

It was for Shamal, though. She could do it… although it just might be entirely awkward the whole way through and with a higher than preferred risk to insult someone accidentally.

Although, it should be pointed out, she knew full well his older superior and the actual 'Father' of this church was out of the village. It was one of the main reasons why today was the day to introduce her
brat to what should be the church group for the rest of his childhood.

Minions can make mistakes and forget or fail to ask a few pertinent questions, leaders and the like didn't have that luxury and would ask where, why, and for what reason something needed to be done.

Questions like: Why didn't Sonya have a letter of introduction? Who was *her* previous pastor? Did anyone else in the castle have or need an introduction to the church too? Why did *they* mostly avoid attend Mass in any of the three churches Moneglia had?

All entirely pertinent questions, everything she really *didn't* want to get into right now.

She was just going to let sleeping dogs lie, and not get into anything needing exact details right now. Her people could pick to do whatever it was they wanted to do, and she'd make excuses if they needed her to but *what* excuses they might want needed to be left up to them.

"Any concerns or questions I can answer for you before Father Castiglione returns?" Inquired the priest curiously when the pause in the conversation stretched on without her or the brat saying anything.

"Not... particularly, no." There was the question if anything this man or his superior could do would help Peter, but again until the man decided what he wanted she really didn't want to bring up the topic just in case it *wasn't* what he wanted for himself. "*There's just the question of when Father Castiglione is returning, for us to introduce Shamal to him as a new member of his... flock?*"

"...oh, of course! He should return in time for morning Mass next week, not to worry. I'll be sure to deliver the letter to him before then, so if you would just take the time to greet him after the service you two attend then we'll have that settled as quickly as possible." Enthused the deacon brightly, aiming an equally as brightly cheerful smile to her brat who regarded him somewhat suspiciously for doing so. "Forgive me for not volunteering that myself... I don't often welcome newcomers to our congregation."

"It's fine." And exactly why she was speaking to him and not the guy normally in charge. "*We'll see you next Sunday then.*"

"*God be with you.*"

"*And you, Father.*" Shamal chirped obediently to some formula that she did at least belatedly recognize from a period of another life. Her echo half a second behind him seemed to satisfy whatever it was he was looking for, for the man simply waved as they left the church's vaulted main room.

Alek and Marco, leashed to the railing with their own little water dish to wait out the early morning service, both looked up as they got nearer. The tri-colored young dog was now officially bigger than his littermate by some significant measure, making some serious progress on growing into his oversized head and all. Her own young canine was leaner, with some rangy legs to go with his oversized paws, not that you could see that under all the fluff they both had.

Equally as differently, Marco wagged his tail happily to even just see them much less be given freedom of movement again while Alek gave them a disgustedly resigned look which meant someone had petted him while they were distracted.

Thankfully neither dog had shown to be ill-tempered, around their food or new people both, so either they just weren't aggressive creatures by nature or the training manuals she had gotten had prevented
that trait from occurring. As uncomfortable as Alek was with random unknowns trying to pet him, he would at least mitigate it by other measures aside growling or nipping offending digits.

…Marco, of course, was delighted by the same thing. He probably got all the pets, and likely wanted even more from Shamal and her if she so chose to give him some.

Sonya slung the water out of the dog bowl into the bushes nearby as Shamal got the leashes untangled from the railing where they were left with various other canines for Mass. Alek, upon being freed from his brother, immediately wedged himself between her thighs like that was going to protect him from other people who were not there.

The bigger her dog got, the less cute his puppy habits like hiding between her boots was. He was now easily knee-high, about ninety pounds of lean muscle and sinew padded by fluffy fur. Forcing himself between her thighs meant she had to shift her weight around fast or end up on her ass.

…or on him, which neither of them would appreciate much.

"Mamma, you have to be good." Her Misty brat was not remotely fooled by her expression of innocent confusion when she turned to him to accept Alek's leash and see what he meant. "Please? It's important, so even if they are mean I need you to be good."

Great. She sighed, messing his already kinked hair up now that it wouldn't matter it was disordered naturally. "Already planned on it, brat. You didn't really need to ask me, I know how important this religious thing is for you and… him."

"Yeah… like how no one had to ask you to be nice to Nono Vongola?"

"I was nice. Then he went and did something stupid. Several somethings stupid, to several different people." Specifically ordering his hair for maximum irritation, she snatched her hand away before he could even finish his first bat at it. "Everyone gets a chance, kotenok. I will at least try as long as they do until such time it's entirely too one-sided."

Shamal actually paused for a whole second to pat down his hair hurriedly, as futile as that action was, stubbornly not reacting to her raised eyebrow as they started off back to the castle. "This is different, mamma. It's not where you have a presence in. It's really different from what you had back in Moscow, and I want it to go well."

Well, he had a point. She was not a religious authority and had no interest in that facet of human nature, so that kind of limited her on speaking on the topic. "Yeah, I get it. Leave it up to the experts and no mention of the Flying Spaghetti Monster religion."

Brat suddenly tripped over his own feet, his summer of gymnastics instruction turning the fall into a controlled tumble to the cobblestones and getting worryingly sniffed then licked to death by his dog. Sonya and Alek obligingly paused for them to get sorted out, only for her godchild to flat out ignore his pet to scramble upright and seize her around the knees with wide eyes.

"What? Mamma, is there really a religion for a flying spaghetti monster?"

"May His holy noodle appendage reach out and touch your life, preferably for dinner and with extra sauce." She intoned semi-sarcastically and managed to maintain a straight face for a bare second. Then had to give in with a laugh at his wide, sparkling brown eyes for the mere mention of it being possible. "No, kid. Pastafarianism isn't a religion. Yet."

Shamal set his boney chin on her thigh, making a whole production out of thinking hard. "Do they take converts?"
"…brat, he'd kill me if I helped convert you to a fake religion, made up just to poke fun at how out there some of the tenants of organized religion really sound." That may or may not really exist yet, she didn't really remember when that became a thing rather than just a joke to make at organized religions.

"It would almost be worth it to see his face." Mused the Mist seriously, unable to suppress the smirk on his face any longer. "It'd serve him right…"

Sonya sighed heavily at his continued grudge holding and changed the subject somewhat weakly. "You want to think about becoming an atheist like me? No religious reputation upkeep to worry about, no religious authority to impress or make nice with, no weird religious rituals to do? Side effects may include but is not limited to crippling moments of existential horror at how pointless it all seems, wondering just what fuckery is going on without an easily applied universal answer, feeling weird when religious fanatics start discussing their imaginary deities and how they've somehow instructed everyone to live as part of a casual conversation, and the sensation of being the only sane person in a room full of religious nutcases when the subject is ever raised."

"Resounding sell there, mamma." Getting up and brushing both road dust and dog fur off his nicer pair of pants, Shamal scooped up Marco's leash and wrestled his beast back into something approaching order instead of all over him. "But no, thank you. I'm Catholic, like Cesare and Mister Renato and my dad."

"Okay, just asking."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 16th of August, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Anna, can I borrow you and Pavuchky for a… uh, slightly murderous project?"

"Of course, milady. We'd be delighted to assist."

"…milady?"

"Well," offered the younger girl mischievously, "you objected to 'Boss Lady' and failed to give me something else to use… so I thought up another title for you, milady."

Sonya eyed the oldest Mist in the castle with all the exasperation she felt towards her type of Flame user. "You, are a pain in the ass. Why didn't I know that before you moved in with me?"

"Yes, I am. And because I'm smarter than that." Anna announced serenely, setting aside the lap loom and what effort she had made on making a small scrap of spider silk cloth for testing. "Now?"

"Please. I know it's Sunday and Italians are a whole lot of weird about business taking place on Sundays, but we've got Lady Vongola's dance lesson tomorrow and other shit I don't want to put off just for this asshole."

"Of course."

(WMonday the 17th of August, 1970. Department of Law, University of Parma, Parma, Province of Parma, Emilia-Romagna, Italian Republic.)

Wincing, the Mirror Lady lowered her apparently antique hand mirror and turned the reflection
away while grimacing.

"…in my defense, I didn't know he slept in the nude." Sonya offered fairly, kicking a boot backwards on the lip of the university building they had perched on just to see the results of her mildly murderous project.

Pavuchky adjusted where he was perched on Anna's back, nothing of which seemed to bother the Mist. When the spider didn't seem interested in doing anything more, the thief turned back to the absolute mess of activity their little 'present' earned.

They at least now knew that Anna's pet couldn't kill with his venom still, and that his unaltered spider silk was only strong enough to hold and keep a Mafioso bound when layered, all of which were details she was happy to have nailed down before she had to leave everyone behind without her keeping an eye on everything.

It'd take significant effort for Pavuchky to keep someone captive, and while the poison was inflammatory it wasn't disorientating for someone with an adult's constitution. Not exactly child-safe, being an orb weaver about the size of a toy poodle, but at least even if Anna didn't mind her pet twenty-four hours and seven days a week… no one would end up mummified in the attic spaces because Pavuchky got hungry.

They had let the spider hunt that asshole assassin her sister reported on, just to see how well the Mirror Lady's pet matched up against a full-grown human. While not particularly upset to get a still alive if completely cocooned assassin and a slightly webbed single-sleeping fishing boat at the end, that did mean Sonya had to kill the man herself.

Usov's revolver now had one less bullet, but at least it kept things neat without her personal weapons being connected to anything lethal happenings around locally… yet. She might've used the Bec de Corbins a time or twice, but those were wildly apart distance-wise so there was the hope they weren't on a government watch list or two.

The boat they'd do… something with. Sonya wasn't sure about sailing as an activity but learning how when they lived pretty much right next to the seashore might be something to do with the brat next summer. They just had to pry off all the webbing first, then there would be something to learn on and not care if they accidentally ran it ashore.

The assassin they were left with… or rather the corpse of one, she had very considerately returned to his famiglia.

Apparently, from the tone of the scream, his boss didn't appreciate it. Don Todd was very fucking unamused someone got into his bedroom and strung up the still bleeding and spiderweb shrouded corpse on his wall, so it'd be the very first thing he'd see when he got up.

Sneaking into somewhere with a Mist, even into a nest of assassins with a young one, was so much cheating it almost wasn't worth bothering. Literally walking in through the front doors keenly felt like violating every tenant of being stealthy she had learned through trial and error and Arseniy's lectures, to the point it cheapened the very act.

Then again, very few had materialistic orientated obsessions. Mostly tended to fixate on mental things or how they were perceived. Her job was probably safe enough, until someone managed to figure out how to get more miserly ones like Viper trained up from first pop.

"There are a few things even I do not appreciate seeing." Her only spy confided with audible distaste, glancing only once more into her hand mirror before disappearing it to wherever she stored
it and rising to her own feet. "Are we done here, milady?"

"Probably." Sonya allowed, glancing at the personal residence they were perched high to view down into.

She didn't really care if Don Todd knew she killed his man and sent the corpse back, as a matter of fact she was expecting him to connect those two obvious dots. They could very well kill someone in her territory… but then she'd know. If he had to rush it through and whatnot fine, but she'd be extra certain to return the favor in the most embarrassing and aggravating method she could.

No, it probably wasn't intelligent to mock or harass an entire clan/collection of assassin types like this. Eventually, they were going to continue trading these murderous little calling cards until someone edged a touch too far over the line into true hostility.

If it'd be her or Don Todd would be something only the future could tell.

…although, she was pretty sure Tyr wouldn't mind helping her deal with his northern brethren if they were going to be this kind of assholes to her. She didn't foresee any reason why not, being that would require her to take any business she might need an assassin for to him if Cesare opted not to take first dibs, but asking was something to do the next time he came over for gossip and not-coffee.

"Does Pavuchky have a favorite snack yet?"

"He appreciates caterpillars more than most, although he will not say no to more butterflies." Anna informed her politely. "I must ask you limit any offerings to about ten at a time, he'll eat them first and not everything else a growing spider needs if there's more than two handfuls on his web."

"I'll keep that in mind." Promised the thief wryly as she followed the younger girl through the window's reflection back to the castle for breakfast.

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(Wednesday the 19th of August, 1970. Morgue, Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Rasputin regarded his new 'coworker' suspiciously, then gave Doctor Kappel a questioning look.

"Our new associate here is from Greece." Offered the ex-Nazi dryly, not even bothering to moderate his tone to be less skeptical or sarcastic even with the 'Greek native' standing right behind him. "He's come from far away to learn your exceptional talent with investigating how someone has expired and patching up corpses to look semi-decent for burial."

"You don't do sarcasm well, doctor."

Kappel simply sniffed judgmentally, nudging his half-moon spectacles higher up the bridge of his nose with one long finger and refraining from commenting on that.

"…what's wrong with Italians?" Inquired their supposed Greek native curiously.

Trotsky wasn't doing his usual 'fingers of ice down his spine' thing to warn of yet another spy he'd have to work with or around. While that wasn't a solid sign they were misjudging the new guy, it also wasn't a sign of innocence. Just that the slightly disembodied Mist couldn't find anything without raising suspicion, at least for right now.

He made that mistake at first, much to his own embarrassment. It was hard to keep in mind that most all the ones he was now assigned to work with ended up being after something he didn't want to share. The last three of his four coworkers ended up being Vongola personnel wanting to know how
he 'raised the dead', with varying amounts of success depending on how much they believed the same thing.

There had only been one skeptical case, and they caught her the very first day because the girl had asked straight out if he *really* could raise the dead with Sun Flames in the first five minutes after being assigned to work with him.

Might be this one was really Greek and trying to figure out what they were doing so intently here, as apparently so many wishing to work in a morgue was a bit odd for those aspiring medical students coming here for work. Which meant he had to put up with this, at least for a few days, until he tipped both Rasputin or Trotsky off to what he was after.

Either way, it was probably past time he contacted his legal guardian about all the interests he was getting. Nurse Primakova had been attempting to get it to stop, at least on Vongola's end of things, but either her new boyfriend didn't have that kind of pull or Don Vongola was one of those *really* persistent types.

He might not *entirely* be a fan of Miss Bazanova, even if she pointed him in this direction and found him a mostly safe place to practice with his Flame's unique Activation ability, but she did get things done at a respectable clip once informed of an issue.

Mainly his issues happened to *start* with her, but no one was perfect. She did get help for Igor, now Trotsky, when he needed the specialized help after they were attacked.

"*I think I'm going to switch to the night shift for a couple days.*" Rasputin informed his superior in his native language, collecting another set of the paperwork he had been caught half way through filling out for teaching purposes.

"*I will sign off on it.*" Kappel promised tartly back, also in Russian even if it was somewhat unlikely to keep the conversation between the two of them alone if this new guy had half a brain cell in his head. "*Bring it up yourself if you need the excuse to get away from your latest attempt at a coworker.*"

It was the best help the good doctor could give him, giving excuses for when someone questioned him a bit too much and it got on his last nerve. Rasputin appreciated it even if he didn't have to use them, and the two Flame users both liked it even more for him being an obstinate solid brick wall when anyone caught sight of Trotsky and asked what the Mist was doing with him down here.

Kappel had not started out wildly understanding of having non-medical personnel down in the morgue with him at first. The change was nice, even if he'd rather have the anonymity back.

"*Try to last more than three days, if you would.*" Continued the German native to the new guy, not bothering to give the attempted innocent look much credit at all. "*We are running low on able hands in this department.*"

The mortician that trained Edik had waited only long enough for him to be mostly competent before finally retiring as he had been firmly over the age of seventy, and once he was here for two months the old mortician's previous assistant decided working with the dead was not for him and put in for a transfer to be trained in a different department. Leaving the middle-aged mortician that worked from midnight to ten, Rasputin normally on the morning to eight P.M. shift, and the half-shift duo that worked the insanely busiest eight to midnight hours.

Right now, no one working in St. Julian's morgue could take vacation time because there wasn't anyone to cover for them. Calling in sick was still only acceptable a shift at a time due to the fact the
medical interns, who were all still mainly Russian even if there was starting to be just as many if not more Italians with the random sprinkles of other cultures mixed in, all needed some experience in every department so chucking one or two into the morgue was still 'acceptable' on emergency basis.

Rasputin would be trading on Trotsky's help to get Ayat to trade with him, which shouldn't be hard given he was currently fighting with Rena about something he hadn't bothered to keep up with. Probably who was cheating who at their post-shift poker games, but they both cheated and so was a pretty pointless argument. While that wouldn't be enough to get the Brit to switch shifts with him, that and a bit of free blackmail would.

However, with the shifts being short-staffed as they were… no one could 'trade' their hours without another doctor signing off on it.

Rasputin just had to get through this first shift with the guy then he would be free to work with Rena when the morgue was flooded with new bodies from Mafia Land's usual night life activities. He'd take being worked off his feet instead of needing to watch every word that came out of his mouth around this one until they knew for sure what he was after.

Then, tonight, he could either call Bazanova or talk to Bjørn about getting her word of the unusual interest in him lingering on from when she attempted to put her boot down about it.

(Saturday the 22nd of August, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"Except… we already know that." Sonya eventually managed to interrupt Verde with, lifting a shoulder in a shrug when he pinned her with a dark and very impatient look. "I once tack welded the armor equivalent of a tin can around my own body and survived without breaking a sweat from the heat. Fong and his fellows use the same trick to eat or drink hot things. That man can drink freshly steeped tea without burning his mouth, another of them can bleed off momentum as excess heat if he needs to. Do make a note to remind Peter to use some damn caution when pouring the glass, though. He's fucking lucky he's immune to something that hot."

The Frenchman outright grumbled with dissatisfaction, discarding an entire sheaf of papers from his hands and handing it over to be disposed of as he double checked the rest of what he had. "Experimentation to the outer limits?"

"…hasn't been done as far as I know." She allowed slowly, puffing hard on her pipe once then blowing Storm-charged smoke at the grip of paper in her hands to rid them of it. "Although, it would stand to reason that we can withstand whatever upper limit our Flames can burn at. Whatever that might be."

With another highly displeased grumble, he rather rudely took the seat next to her on the stone bench for the opportunity to write supported by the banister separating the back patio from the barely budding kitchen garden Cesare had mostly ordered the maids to plant for him.

"My amended proposal," the Lightning gave her a pointedly expectant look waiting for whatever interruption she might want to give next, then continued when she merely pulled on her pipe again, "would be to figure out how high of a temperature any specific Flame can stand. Furthermore, to investigate the innate heat signatures of each Flame with the intent of possibly devising a method of remote detection as a possible byproduct."

…Flame user detectors. There were ways that could be abused, multiple ones, but until Verde figured out how the proposed detector operated and what kind of power source was needed or what
range it would have… she really didn't have a solid position to deny it on.

"I'll fund it and might convince a Sky to volunteer for completion's sake." They could make the call afterwards, a man this smart would inevitably realize the same once the 'shiny new avenue of investigation' gloss wore off. It would be interesting how or where he took that realization afterwards, depending. "Next."

Shuffling his paperwork, which really was entirely his since she hadn't given him any just yet, Verde read through his tiny handwriting for whatever point he wanted to raise on these 'bi-monthly' info dumps/reporting occasions. They only happened when the man realized it had been a while since he kept her apprised on what he was doing with the grant money she was paying him, then she got everything he remotely found 'important'.

What a scientist found 'important' and what a thief did… didn't exactly always match up. As she had little else to do, Sonya didn't greatly mind if he wanted a second opinion on his ideas or to be just heard out. Next month would be interesting, given she wouldn't remotely be in range for his next info dump/rant thing.

Verde suddenly bent down and rooted through the box he had dumped at the foot of this newly bought iron bench they were seated on, drawing a wary growl out of Alek as the dog adjusted himself elsewhere to get away from the other person. Ignoring the animal, he drew out…

"…it's a sparkly hair band." Literally. No, not even the disgusted look the man pinned her with would make her change her mind. It was a hair band with several handfuls of thumbnail sized aquamarine glass teardrops… oh. "A helmet?" He kept on glaring but did hand the band of crudely braided wire studded with glass gemstones over. "Succinctly put, yes. Another experimental glass mix, if this one withstands your Flames better and the design holds then this may be considered the prototype instead of an experiment in bending the cooling glass to encourage curvature in the resulting armor plate."

There were two vaguely ordered lines of fake jewels. A smaller line that would initially act as the 'teeth' of the hair band, and larger ones she assumed would make up whatever other head protection her scientific team had dreamed up.

Setting her pipe aside, it was mostly done but she was contemplating starting another bowlful of tobacco to last her the rest of the night, Sonya slid the band on. It did rake her hair back, although the 'teeth' of the item scraped against her scalp unevenly and very irritatingly. Verde very pointedly raised up a pen he took from his lab coat breast pocket, now with an impatient expression plastered across his face.

As with the other set of glass armor she had tested, the sudden growth of the glass gems felt jarringly cool. Those ill-set jewels in her hair pushed against her scalp more as they stretched out to cover the back of her skull, which also pushed the wire frame of the band forward down until it rested squarely on her forehead. The previously forward-facing set of decorative aquamarine jewels grew into rather long spikes of glassy shielding, down to about her chin if what she felt was the end.

She wasn't tipping her chin down, with the original pattern on the band that would stab about twenty or so dagger-shaped tips into her collar bone. She wasn't that stupid, thank you. As it was her view of everything through the gems was warped and very blue, and kind of unsuitably murky with something flickering across her field of view as she watched.

…was that the 'shadow' of her Cloud Flames?
Like most fire or light sources, Flames didn't cast shadows. However, you could see the heat it put off bend the air around it like any other open flame if you caught it at the right angle.

Well, either way she couldn't see shit through this thing. Prying the result of the helmet attempt off her head, the thief smoothed back the hair it attempted to rip out of her scalp and handed off the slowly shrinking accessory. "Hard to see through them. Might want to think of alternating patterns with a more transparent mix for quality of sight reasons."

Verde obligingly wrote that down, as well as an entire mess of some other observations he made while she was distracted by the growing glass. They both waited out the shrinking, and while she was unsurprised if a little impressed with only three cracked gems he seemed rather dissatisfied with the same.

Then the scientist very nearly wandered off on her with his nose buried in the papers he had in hand, but a sharp whistle got not only Verde but Alek to stop and pay attention to her. "I've got a couple things for you, before you go back and bury yourself in your work."

"…Adrik tells filthy, wretched lies."

"Of course he does, but Cesare's backing him up on this one. You need to eat, Verde. I don't care what, or when. Three full meals a day. Make it yourself, eat what Cesare makes, raid the fridges in the midnight hours. Whatever. No excuses because you're a fucking adult, eat when you get hungry." Absently scratching her dog's ruff when he came over to investigate why she gave the command for a full stop of everything, his reward for obeying her, she met the aggravated look he shot her full on. "One would assume, being an adult, the chore of eating would be left up to my digression for when and where."

"You know, the moment you can prove you'll fucking take care of yourself without accidentally starving for a week because you have an interesting project to tinker with… I'll stop harping on about this."

There was some distinctly sheepish feeling silence going on. Sonya, while pulling her pipe back over to be refilled, gave him a flatly unimpressed stare down.

Verde cleared his throat and pretended ignorance, very pointedly not looking her in the eyes anymore. "…while I will not deny past incidents of that type-"

"I will fucking treat you like I do Shamal if you need it. Fucking eat, end of story." Getting up, and ignoring the utterly disgusted glares she was being treated with by both males, she pointedly and slowly reached out and encircled Verde's wrist with her right forefinger and thumb then wiggled the limb to show the slack she had. "You've lost weight, by the way. Like, weight you already can't afford. This? Is not healthy. You're astoundingly lucky Tats hasn't spotted you yet, and I'd advise you to either wait out the rest of her visit or somehow put on twenty pounds in the next week unless you want another lecture about how eating is not an optional choice."

Alek slunk off, irked he was being ignored after obeying her like a good doggo. The Frenchman tugged himself free of her with a few impatient movements but did at least get distracted examining his own wrists skeptically.

"You know what? I will pay you to devise something with an excessively long shelf life you can simply grab and eat for those times you're too occupied to cook or fetch something. You'd even be working to end world hunger if you can do that, and if it's at least bland if not tasty several hundred different militaries would throw money at your head if you can keep their soldiers well fed in field
without extensive supply lines dedicated just to perishable goods. Please."

"I'll think about it." Verde very nearly snarled at her, catching the bulk of his attitude behind his teeth in a semi-impressive show of self-control despite the feelings about plastered across his face.

"One more thing, before you walk off." Sonya rolled her eyes at both him and her own words. "Excuse me, a few more. One, old man Yaozu is still waiting to finish training your reaction time. Another, Bjorn will be here soon with the contracts you might need to refuse any interest in where you work or what you're working on. Basic NDA agreements, the legal version of Omertà you might want to keep with you, and such. Finally, you will be getting bodyguards for this shindig of egghead meetings you were invited to."

With as much irritation he had to be feeling to pull that expression, the Lightning did give her words more than enough thought for being the type he was in two seconds. "Do I require bodyguards? You are insisting to attend yourself for that purpose, correct?"

"You're still a halfway decent person, whoever's pulling this bullshit more than probably isn't and I can't be everywhere with you." With an indifferent shrug, she dismissed that concern. "Besides, if you have such a difficult time training yourself up to a respectable level… then we need to outsource your protection until you are at this level. And while 'guest' would mean I have access to where you are more than any just random person, there are still ways I could be denied depending on the topic you're involved with. A bodyguard just covers the other bases we might need."

Verde scowled while he turned that over in his overly complicated brain, but at least he wasn't aiming that thunderous expression at her anymore. Despite the speed it happened, it was somewhat possible to track where his thoughts were given where he glanced to and the expressions that flickered across his bespectacled face.

Somewhat. Topics might be guessed at, but he didn't linger over anything so guessing how they connected in his views was practically impossible.

"Simply postulating, if I complete Master Yaozu's training—"

"Verde, seriously." Sonya interrupted with a shake of her head. "You can barely stand dragging yourself away from your newly completed labs long enough to put in the time with him to gain a reaction you yourself deemed probably important to learn. It's fine that you're not combative by nature to enjoy training yourself, some people just aren't. What you are is smart, and if you can figure out how to use that intelligence to substitute for battle experience you'd be golden, but until then a few sacrifices need to be made to keep you whole."

The full body twitch was a bit confusing, but then apparently he had a moment of inspiration and that sheaf of notes he still had in hand was promptly utilized for a whole different set of notations given he didn't seem to care they were being held sideways while he wrote.

Okay… whatever worked for him. She lit her pipe while he was busy, obligingly and with no little bemusement copying a few papers that had a few inches of free space for him when he impatiently motioned her to.

Then Verde just stalked off on her without a word of goodbye, still scribbling away and entirely distracted enough to barely miss banging his head off the brick of the castle walls.

…she was highly tempted to tattle to her sister about his weight-eating issues. Petty of her, but it would serve the asshole right for skipping social niceties like indicating the conversation was over instead of on pause.
Alek regarded her suspiciously for a few seconds but accepted belated pets to soothe his upset at being ignored when he obeyed her so promptly. Sonya joined him on the patio brickwork and got about forty-fifty pounds of a good boy in her lap for her troubles, which would mean her last pair of good black slacks would be embedded with little white hairs when she got up later.

She and Shamal had to go clothes shopping tomorrow… or more likely Wednesday.

Passing on a word to Don Visconti that she was taking her godson to shop in his city might be polite, and as she didn't have an introduction or a number for him that meant passing word through Mr. Silvery-white through his wife. She might as well invite Lady Vongola out to get boots with them, with Tatiana, and maybe… possibly Mrs. Silvery-white.

She'd be forced to invite a few Vongola people along due to security issues… probably Ganauche. Wondering if she could get away with just the Lightning Guardian, the thief scrubbed at her dog's ears as he seemed to want her to.

Then… well. Tatiana would be leaving first, she had to help Lisa set up for the upcoming school year by ordering the nurse station and getting acquainted with whatever Avdotya had started last year. Sonya would probably not be too far behind, she had nearly fifteen contracts to complete in about three months' worth of time or risk defaulting on something.

She also had to check through everyone's paperwork and get a few contracts settled before she left everyone here for the rest of the year. Ensure everything was ready and waiting for the first few legal channels someone would attempt before long, so Larion's mom wasn't entirely blindsided with it when it happened.

She had been hoping it would happen while she was here, but apparently no one was that stupid. Which meant it would end up being dealt with by whichever of the full-fledged criminals were present at the time…

With a sigh, which earned her a lick on the nose by someone who had some terrible doggy breath, Sonya sourly eyed her pet. "Bjørn should be here soon… so we can get a start on turning Hawk into someone I have at least blackmail on before we leave him behind with the rest of my non-combatant civilians…"

Alek stared up at her blankly, apparently this was all well over what his simple little mind could process.

"And you're no help." This earned her a few feeble wags of a tail. "…you're a dipsh*t."

Her dog apparently decided that was praise and attempted to lick her again.

"Bullshit, I didn't even change the tone I used!"

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(Tuesday the 25th of August, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Fiorella more fell out of the way of Sonya's rather straightforward haymaker than slid as the maneuver they were practicing asked of her, and her erstwhile student seized hold of her wrist by complete accident in the hopes of preventing a rough meeting with the floor under their feet. Then she hung there, looking more than a little nonplussed over her position half hanging off the thief's wrist and most of her weight awkwardly balanced on one leg.
She blew out a sigh, which made the older woman give her a sheepish smile. "Okay. Well…
mostly?"

"Oh no, I fucked this up. Might I ask what to do to get out of this?" Refuted Lady Vongola pleasantly enough, still with that chagrined little twist to her lips as she hung off the blonde.

"Knees. You've got a free leg, and the weight you're putting on my left side means it should be simple to hook your ankle around the back of my leg… no, the one closest to you, and if you either kick or pull normally the joint will give way."

"Normally." She echoed dryly, tugging experimentally and graduating to a few light kicks to the back of Sonya's left knee. "Not always."

"Those that tend to grapple often generally can prevent this from happening at all. But you get this close to someone who uses guns more often, odds are you should be able to get them on the ground." Raising her arm, Sonya set the older woman back on her own feet. "Again, Mrs. Silvery-white would be a decent practice partner. More your level of strength, rather."

"This should be sobering, or maybe terrifying. I still just can't get over the fact you can bench press me with one arm."

"Why are you so giddy today?" Demanded the thief, more than a bit confused and finally beginning to question it as their attempt at combat lessons trailed off into nothing yet again.

"I finally got six mafia-related news stories, and reported each of them, to Lisa's requirements. Now I must do ten a week, but for right now I've decided to just bask in the little victories." Fiorella confided not particularly quietly, getting an amused and understanding hum from the Sun nurse watching the frankly flailing-prone practice going on from a corner. "Progress for progress' sake, but it's progress I couldn't have done it at the beginning of the summer."

"…ah."

"Consider it the same as successfully disguising yourself to mom's specifications, Nya." Tatiana chipped in, which did make the whole situation make that much more sense.

"Oh. Okay then." Yeah… then nothing particularly constructive was going to be done today. "Are you sure you want to come with me and Tats this Friday?"

"Oh yes! Well, do you know the last time I left Italy was?" Giving up any pretense of wanting her usual instructions today, the middle-aged mother of three pressed her knuckles as far back on her hips as she could reach to stretch out her spine. "As long as we're not just hopping the border and messing around like a bunch of teenagers, and take the bodyguard my husband will inevitably foist off on us just to be safe, I don't see why not."

"What did you tell your husband?"

"A shopping trip, although he failed to ask just where I might be wishing to shop. And the letter detailing your invitation I've sent along won't get there until… Friday afternoon, if I've timed it right."

Tatiana snorted at the deadpanned answer, unfolding herself from her convenient corner and sauntering over now the risk of being hit by flailing limbs was minimized. "That would be so risky… if we weren't really just going shopping for Nya's insanely comfortable boots and not luring you into something particularly asinine like a trap."
Fiorella huffed, blowing a few wisps of hair that had escaped her somewhat elaborate updo away from her face. A bit different than the poofy hair she usually had, but more out of respect to hair pulling tactics than practicality. "I would have loved discussing it with him, and any advice he might have for the trip… if he would damn well get the courage to call me."

"Avoidance? Out of Don Vongola?" Sonya inquired skeptically, trying to mesh that in with 'heavy handed' and 'indifferent to extended connections' he had shown to her already.

"Does he know how to fuck up with grace? Or at least how to mitigate his disasters down instead of drag it out?"

"Do any of us?" Shot back the younger sister, shrugging when her elder gave her a raised eyebrow. "There's limited ways someone could give Don Vongola the cold shoulder either politically or socially and survive it... perhaps the subject was just never raised before."

"He's what, ten years older than us? Pretty sure the subject of 'you can piss off those weird other people around you' had to have been raised before." Tatiana countered, mainly just because she could than for any other reason. "Maybe not in concert with what he's in control of now..."

"Or possibly that might be part of the issue?" Finished the only still active thief between the two of them after a moment. "That he can't figure out a way to separate non-personal business and whatever power he has to respond 'correctly'?"

She thought about it, but eventually just shrugged. "Might be. I'm not him so I can't say with any certainty... but how would you even go about that? When you're not only the head of a criminal organization with minions that stare holes in your back to set the tone of whatever... but the leader of a whole alliance of the same sort that watches you for a moment of weakness or to see what you do to copy?"

"As fascinating as it is to listen to you two dissect Nono's recent behaviors," Nilda interrupted pointedly, three wine glasses in one hand and a half full one paired with an open bottle in the other, "I believe this is 'officially' the last lesson Fiorella has with you. We have more pressing business, ladies."

Fiorella glanced downwards at her hands instead of taking the glass her bodyguard held out to her, then glanced up at her temporary instructor. "To be completely honest here, I don't actually feel as sore and as tired as I assumed I would be after barely two months of dance instruction."

"Of course you don't." Tatiana sniffed in superiority, shaking a finger at the older woman as she accepted her glass of whatever liquor the spy's husband sent along for this occasion. "I've been managing your recovery and muscle growth for optimal ease, so you've felt maybe a tenth of the strain you were under. You are a full-time mother, and while it's never too late to start any exercise regime for your health... there can be ill-timed occasions to start. Especially cold, when you've had nothing before."

"This all being said, avoid the temptation to get another Sun to manage your muscle growth from this point out." Sonya chipped in, dubiously inspecting the dark red liquid being poured. "You need to earn it fairly now."

"And you will be tempted." Nilda decided to chip in with, handing out the last two glasses as her charge finally accepted it with a bemused smile. "And, without the experience of forcing yourself through training anyways no matter how badly you feel... you'll be tempted more than most would be in your position."
Lady Vongola rolled her eyes as she sipped her wine. "Except I'm the mother of three young boys, ladies. If I could do a quarter of the things I wanted to instead of what they needed at whichever given time…"

"…point." Conceded Tatiana reluctantly around the rim of her glass.

"More importantly," Sonya decided to interrupt the slightly off silence with, "the Mirror Lady's glass bauble will still work while she is in Italy. If you need someone to critique your form, or for emergency advice about dealing with specific Flame users, or even just because you need an exit that very moment, again just knock it against whatever glassy surface is at hand."

"Oh, how lovely." Pulling the same bit of sea-green glass from the pocket of her sweatpants she had picked to work out in, she rolled the pad of her thumb over the ripple fracture maring one side of the bit of material. "I was thinking of getting this set in something… although I wasn't entirely sure if she would want it back or not."

"Not. We have an entire basket of those glass shards. We can give you more of them, if you like."

The older woman nodded slowly. "In fact, I think I might."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 25th of August, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"-and this is the man you requested, Dama. Garrett McCarthy." The Lackey Bjørn introduced, then turned to him as the lights were flicked on and everyone assembled for this meeting jostled for either standing space or room at the bare table apparently moved in here for storage reasons more than utility. "Is English acceptable or…?"

"I've no preference." He allowed slowly, still mostly just taking in the whole castle and the mess of individuals going about their own business here.

It was a large operation and, given this was an after-hours meeting, with the front of being simply a slightly understaffed castle residence. It couldn't be all that civilian-friendly despite the soft-looking people and the young pets wandering around, there was a full-blown killer in the kitchen and this thief calling the shots.

The blonde Russian he found vaguely familiar as promised that glanced up, probably just to match a name with a face, almost immediately returned her attention to the work she had in her hand instead of focus on trying to 'impress' upon him whatever she found important to showcase to outsiders. Not exactly an odd reaction, about half the people he ended up working for found posturing to those unable to really hurt them pointless.

"Hawk is basically a nonentity, no past and no knowledge." Jerking a thumb absently in the direction of a man with yellow eyes who seemed to have no issue with that being announced to a relative unknown, the young woman hastily scribbled various bits into several pre-typed contracts after verifying everything was generally as she wanted them. "I need a bodyguard for one of the minions, train him up as one for a few weeks to maybe a month. Bonus if you, or him, foil something attempted during an event we are pretty sure is a trap for Verde. The green guy."

'The green guy' was in fact completely colored green and another more interested in fully reading through the paperwork passed to him than inspecting a new entity to the situation. Interesting. "That's it?"
It was probably the flippancy that had her looking up sharply, but she wasn't his boss. Just a repeated customer, shelling out a bit more of the money he needed to stay solvent in Mafia Land instead of being tossed out with the rest of the trash unable to afford a ticket off the island.

…so, mouthing off to her face probably wasn't in his best interest. If this really was exactly as it seemed, then he'd be able to afford perhaps half a year or more easily with this paycheck. Helped when most that go through Mafia Land treated it more like the resort it was modeled after than the criminal haven it had started out as and was supposed to be.

The issue was this was entirely too much to be exactly as presented. A woman he couriered a little something to asked for him again to do something completely divorced from his last errand for her more than a year later, involving a guy with amnesia, having to do with a short time frame before a specific skill set was needed to explain bringing in an outsider.

Too many things just seemed too easy or didn't entirely match up for him to feel like this was a genuine windfall of lucky coincidences.

"You so much as twitch wrong to either the kids or the hired help, you will be wrapped up and hung in the attic room until I have the time to deal with you. Which will not be until almost next year." Tilting her head to the side, the thief inspected him from head to toe. Lingering only briefly on his scars, impressively enough. "I also would not expect to be fed in that case, either."

…actually, that was fair enough of a warning to give an outsider invited into another's den. Garrett grit his teeth as that didn't exactly mesh with his previous assumption, wondering just when all the details would finally make some damn sense put all together. "Alright."

She peeled a set of paperwork clipped together and tossed it at his head. "Sign that by the end of the month, it's part of the setup we are sending Verde into this mess with to avoid undue civilian attention."

It was titled as a 'Non-Disclosure Agreement' big enough even the man wearing coke-bottle glasses could read it without them, but he couldn't exactly read the rest of it without his own reading glasses. "Maybe."

"Then you better hope Hawk will be up to doing things himself by then."

Garrett glanced between the sheaf of paper and the still silent men in the back-office room affair with them. "…we'll see."

"Then take a room on the second floor, do not go higher for your own safety. Do not bother the residents, if even one complains you will have to do whatever instruction bouncing around the world with me instead. A modest budget to get both yourself and Hawk outfitted to pose as professional bodyguards will be supplied, any reasonable expenses for a long stay or personal supplies are allowed. Otherwise, if you do sign the paperwork and perform halfway decently, I will see you in a month." Straightening up with the papers she wanted, the woman did pause and look him in the eye fully. "There are two Mist Flame users assigned to the task of keeping security for me. Save us all the headache and just do not try it in the first place."

Were they willingly keeping watch for her without her being one, or were they all Flame users?

That… changed a few things. Garrett never really interacted with many before this, but he did know Flame users tended to operate by a slightly different set of rules that only made sense to them.

…still didn't quite tell him if this was or was not a trap to kill him. He might've absently more than
intentionally teased the baby-faced thief about possibly breaking into her secured courier pouch to steal something of what she had delivered by hand, but surely that little bit wasn't enough to get one of these greedy creatures hunting after his hide with this much complexity… right?

…right?
"I think you need a new belt there, kiddo." Tatiana observed pointedly but earned herself a full out pout instead of the absent shrug she had expected. "...you don't want a new one?"

Shamal hunched his thin, boney shoulders and clutched at the way too short length of leather that certainly did not encircle his little waist with enough slack to be worn. "...Mister Renato bought me this one."

Yeah tall, dark, and snarky bought practically everything the kid had to his name before he moved in with her baby sister. That didn't make the stretched out and slightly ragged belt any more special than the last little button-down shirt he tried this on. "And while it fit you then, it doesn't anymore. You should not be sucking in your little gut to even hope of catching the clasp on that thing."

Sonya poked her head out of the changing room she had been using, half dressed because of fucking course she would find that somehow acceptable, and pointedly frowned at the kid. "You do not have to toss anything just yet, brat. I believe we've gone over that."

"Hey, lady, you're supposed to be trying on that little silver number." She interrupted before a saleslady could hope to glance over and see one of their customers hanging around in nothing but a slip and bra, wagging a finger at her younger sister. "Let me argue with the bratling."

She rolled her eyes but did pull back into the changing room to finish her own fit testing.

The little Mist she had been arguing with eyed her strangely. A soft huff, and she crooked a finger to get the kid closer instead of whisper at a level Sonya would certainly be able to eavesdrop in on. "What Nya and I can do in the privacy of her own castle is one thing. What is 'socially acceptable' attire in public is another. Nya doesn't care a damn, but I'd rather not be forced to sweet talk our way out of a ticket for 'indecent exposure'."

"...but there were a couple people without shirts outside..."

"Nya and I are girls, those were boys. We can't get away with no shirt while you can."

"That's stupid." Shamal informed her huffily. "Why is it okay for me to take my shirt off but you can't?"

"...if you were a year or two older, I'd be suspicious this was going in a completely not-innocent direction." She deadpanned, snickering at his annoyed and very confused look before reaching up to grab the very reason boys and girls had different rules for how they dressed. "You don't have a pair of these, kid."

Her nephew eyed her 'assets' suspiciously, glanced downward at his flat chest, then looked up at her warily. "I think you're pulling my leg, zia. Those aren't very special, all ladies have those. Yours are just big and suffocating."

"...why you-!"

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything." Ganauche managed with an impressively straight face as he slid through the last rack of clothing on display to join her, not entirely able to iron out the curve to his mouth as he strolled up to the two of them. "Oi, pint-sized. You better not be talking from
"You ever get hugged by zia?" Demanded the little colossal brat that was her nephew, sniffing in insult and turning to stomp off in the general direction of the belt displays. "Trust me, not fun."

"The older he gets, the less cute he is." Tatiana confided to her boyfriend, a bit irked at being called 'not fun'. She'd show the little brat, probably the day she had to go back to Moscow, giving him a 'big, suffocating, hug' just to make sure he understood the differences. "So not adorable anymore… and taking way too much after my sister."

He had to crane his neck around rather awkwardly far in order to give her a pointedly amused look, snickering when she stuck her tongue out at him. She got a hug of greeting, because he was apparently too much of a gentleman to expect something more graphic in public for a hello, and he finished sliding into their little party casually by putting her firmly in his blind spot and looping an arm behind her waist to join in on the waiting for fittings.

A seemingly innocent habit of his she knew let him focus his remaining eye on watching the boutique's door as well as most of the store's interior as he could get while not stressing out about what he couldn't keep track of anymore.

Ganauche was adapting to his disability, a whole year and some of being without one eye generally forced one to. It wasn't ideal, having two working eyes were the best for keeping yourself aware and informed on what was going on.

She knew perfectly well it would take at least a year, if not longer, for the hospital advisory board to review and debate the merits of her proposed surgery to replicate damaged organs and limbs with Cloud Flames then ensure they remained with Sun Flame therapy. That wasn't counting how long it would take to complete the independent research that would be put into her proposal before she could start gathering up experimental subjects to test the surgery on.

The hospital wouldn't have access to a Cloud of Sonya's caliber and refined touch, unless they pulled some very interesting strings with the various guildhalls Mafia Land maintained. As a matter of fact… there really couldn't be very many Clouds willing to head to an island in the middle of nowhere on the whims of unknowns.

Maybe they would ask her sister to explore the feasibility of turning Cloud Voodoo into a restorative Flame assisted surgery technique. Until there was a Cloud Flame nurse available, there were limited options in who could be safely asked without news of the possibility being leaked outside the hospital's control until they decided if it was good or not.

…Tatiana hoped for that eventuality. Yeah, her foster sibling being asked to help determine if her proposal had any merit was kind of unethical… but that was pretty minor in the face of what could be.

Besides, Sonya could then obscure any remote connection to their dork of a brother easier if she was the one involved in the testing stages.

A slight squeeze to her hips had her looking back at her boyfriend, but with the eyepatch all she did was get a good look at the scars around his missing eye. "You're not going to ask what I've been doing since the last time we could talk?"

"I'm pretty sure I don't have the clearance to hear the answer." Tatiana teased lightly, resting her head on his shoulder for a moment so he'd know without forcing him to contort around that she truly didn't mind the silence from him almost all last month. "I'm fine with that, I know there will be things
we can't tell one another… I had no illusions about that before we had that chat on the cliff sides. So long as you don't mind I can't always tell you what I'm doing at the hospital or the school, it shouldn't matter as long as you at least say hi when you can."

The light hold turned into a strong hug, and the Mafioso snickered as his arm loosened. "Yeah, but now I can say something about it. Timoteo had us go to our school and volunteer around a little… turns out there were a couple interesting things going on your baby sister had a strong influence on kicking with steel-toed boots."

…really? "On what?"

"Something to do with a Mist boogeyman-"

Sonya very nearly shattered the thin flimsy door separating the cubical to test the fit of clothing before you bought it from the rest of the store, pinning her boyfriend with a very lavender look. "Hand it over."

Tatiana took the opportunity to inspect the fit of the little satin silver tunic-dress she was wearing while the thief scanned through a handful of rather crinkled papers, mourning that there wasn't a bespoke tailor in this little boutique so she could get something similar fitted around her chest and hips.

It kind of sucked having the body shape she did, with her bust and hips she didn't really fit anything made for more 'normal' sized women of her height range. Most if not all her clothing was tailored to fit instead of hang awkwardly off her frame or risk her busting the seams at the hip or chest, and fashion trends were all about 'lean and leggy' again… which might describe her little sister but did not touch Tatiana's figure at all.

The shimmery material, actual satin with this level of posh shopping districts in historic Rome, kind of washed out the color in her baby sister. Being a dirty ash-blonde meant while Sonya could do strong and bright colors with ease, not enough color leeched what there was in her completely out until she looked concerningly pale.

…paired with something, like a bright red shawl and maybe a pair of tight black leggings to reduce the amount of light colors, and her sister would make a very pretty piece of arm candy.

For Verde.

Well, you couldn't get everything you wanted in life.

"D'Attilio sends his regards, and would like you to know it took him so long because-"

"He had things to do, I know." Sonya cut Ganauche off with, snorting at whatever she was reading and stuffing the pages into her neglected purse. "Although sending word would not be remiss of him next time, to ensure I am aware he is still alive until he can get to me."

"Ah… yeah. I'll pass that on tonight." Allowed the Lightning Guardian sheepishly, a second before Tatiana realized that her sister might've been slightly concerned how a friend of tall, dark, and snarky might've been coping after his… disappearance. Yeah, at least calling would've been nice if part of Sonya's restless behavior could be contributed to that issue. "Anything else you can think to say about this?"

Steely grey eyes pinned him in place for a second as she thought about it, and eventually she lifted her tattooed shoulder in a shrug. "According to a Mist I've directed Tyr to meet with, hunting this 'boogeyman' is a lethal undertaking while in Italy."
"...huh. Later then?"

"Maybe." Cut short her baby sister, turning on a heel and retreating into the changing cubicle.

Ganauche shrugged, apparently not bothered much by the idea. It slightly jostled her, but in just the right way to catch sight of her nephew lingering over a display a bit further in this boutique.

Shamal seemed to have gotten distracted by a Lite-Brite display depicting Mickey Mouse in one corner of this shop, and she made note of that for later Christmas shopping. Either the backpack being advertised in little plastic lights or the little showy toy, either or.

"So... you showing up means our watchers take a hike, right?" Tatiana inquired curiously, because neither she nor her sister missed the obvious presence lingering around them since Hawk drove them into the city. Unsurprising when Sonya reported they'd be in another Cloud's territory for business-related shopping, but it was only ignorable for a small measure of time when all they were doing was bolstering the local infrastructure spending their... or Nya's, hard earned money.

"What? Oh, yeah. Don Visconti also asked I pass along his thanks for the early warning, it let him get all his less than impeccably self-controlled cousins out of the district for the afternoon while there's an outsider here." Ganauche twisted to peer fully out a window, making a half-heartedly hidden signal that made no sense to her, before turning around again and pretending he didn't do anything at all.

"Aww... manners."

"Oi, at least let me watch if you're going to kiss me." Complained her boyfriend good naturedly but didn't pull away when she pressed her lips to his cheek. "So, how far are we really going for this 'shopping trip'??"

"Let me put it this way... if we were going to drive there'd be at least a full day of traveling, according to Nya. A pair of plane tickets and two train trips, and we might just take a day and a half to get there and back."

"...shit." Mused the Lightning half wrapped around her. "Timoteo's going to be pissed."

"Then he should've thought about that before he decided letters and snail mail was the way to go to keep in contact with his wife on her... sabbatical." Tatiana shrugged as she pulled away to a socially acceptable distance before the saleslady could do more than frown disapprovingly at the pair of them. "Not that I'm weighing in on that, just saying."

"Yeah, we've been picking at that for weeks but... well, he's a stubborn ass sometimes. When he's made up his mind it takes a lot more than just two or three of us to convince him otherwise." When Sonya emerged from the little changing room, dressed in the blouse and jeans she picked to wear today with the little silver dress draped over an arm, he cocked his head to the side. "You sure you don't mind me tagging along?"

"Can I stop you?" Bit back her little sister, with a surprisingly minimum amount of hostility given how utterly fucked up they found Vongola-centric behaviors this summer. "I'm not taking your presence as insulting to my ability to mind my dependents and would rather you treat it as a date out with my sister than a bodyguarding mission."

"Yes, can and will do."

Her baby sister eyed him severely but stalked off to corral her delinquent brat into finishing their clothing shopping, mainly aimed at replacing everything her godson had outgrown over six months.
"...slightly awkward."

"Oh no, Ganauche, you've yet to meet my dad. Then you can call it awkward." Tatiana teased, although honestly she was slightly hesitant to inform her foster father about her new man for a very specific reason.

She was completely aware Arseniy would rather the two of them have Russian men, if only because it would be easier on him to mind their satisfaction with them. Then interfere if anyone tried anything too unacceptable, in his opinion anyways.

"Have you met him? I don't recall Nya mentioning it..." She did know the vor delivered something to her, mainly to get a glance around where she was spending so much of her holiday time at if not with Lisa and his other kids.

Ganauche pulled a face, likely for his own benefit than for hers given he couldn't see her when she was tucked into his left side so making it wouldn't gain him a visible reaction from her. "I've had enough stress suddenly meeting your mom, can I put that one off for a while?"

"For a little while, yes." Pecking him on his cheek again, she slid out of his arm and off to the register where her baby sister was assembling everything they wanted to buy here for the saleslady to ring up. "Say sometime next year, after Christmas?"

"Sure? Sounds good, I guess."

(Thursday the 27th of August, 1970. Sartre Detective Agency, Marseille, French Republic.)

Turning to her borrowed Mafia Land agent, Sonya gestured to the rented car as Alek slunk out of the rear passenger door while her Lackey held it open. "Fuck off. Give us about two hours, do whatever, but pick us up from the deli down the street."

Garrett thought about it first, a habit that kind of irked her unlike how it came off when Hawk did it to her. However he nodded an agreement in the end and took the keys from the supposed French Storm.

Bjørn sighed when the old timer was far enough away, in the rental and turning the engine over to drive off before they got a parking ticket. "I'm not quite sure what I did wrong there, Dama."

"He's an older vet. There was always the risk he will be too suspicious of anything we might try to reassure him with as just talk. He'll just work himself in ever tightening circles until either the situation or he snaps." Sonya had been half-counting on it, given she had two empty rooms left in her fucking castle and a pair of houses free for any family units that might want to entreat her for protection next. "Everyone older than me will never trust anything you might say, you'll have to prove it by action and deed instead. When he gets back to Mafia Land perfectly fine, he'll give you a bit more credit."

Naiveté was never something that lasted long in the Mafia. Given how much trouble Gedeon, much less the generation of vory she grew up with, treated anything she was involved with?

Renato had been very much an oddity to her for being one and so nonchalant about her use of Flames but apparently, he had not been that unusual for an Italian Flame user. It was nice in a way, not being required to continually prove she could be lethal so fucking around with her was not a good idea… but then there were the blind spots for being one of just a handful of others of the same type.
Firmly shaking that thought off before she could dwell on bitter musings she had been entertaining since the hitman went off to 'die' on them, she checked to ensure all the new sights and scents wasn't distracting her dog from minding traffic and pedestrians. Alek pretended she hadn't caught him licking something dubious up from a discarded wrapper left to litter the street corner, sniffing a grated sapling twice before deciding to empty his bladder against it.

"Charming." Deadpanned the thief, taking her pet's leash from the Lightning-Storm trying to shuffle it and the paperwork they were going to need. "Last chance to object or lodge a protest, Hawk."

Their completely past-less Storm glanced at her, obviously and thankfully actually giving the situation his full attention instead of being dismissive over the risk they were about to incur on his behalf.

Exactly what the old timer did, yet for some random reason she could swallow this better.

"Don't think I've got one." Mused the mostly identity-less man with yellow eyes, hitching a shoulder to show a lack of care or interest in protesting this event. "Getting a legitimate identity is something I can't exactly pass up lightly, just from self-interest alone."

"Even if we find out what your name was, not that I'd hold my breath, I'm still calling you Hawk until you show it's worth it to remember another name." She informed him bluntly, jiggling Alek's leash to let him know she was going to start moving soon.

She had to warn her dog, otherwise the poor thing would end up being dragged about by his collar. He didn't seem to mind too much when it inevitably happened… but she was still wondering how to train him up in order to do without the leash and maybe cease giving him future throat and neck problems.

Thankfully the canine kept in mind she was a hell of a lot stronger than him and followed her up through the front doors into the office building easily enough.

It hadn't changed much since the last time she came through here, a slightly less well-to-do area meant the building was a little dingy and showed some of the still lingering damage from World War Two that hadn't been completely painted over just yet. The business offices were mostly neat and orderly as the group paced the largely empty halls, with a few handfuls of workers and the occasional passerby with a handful of papers sharing the space with them.

Mostly clean offices with a few cracked window frames if no broken panes. If it had been anything worse, the local city government would have patched the building completely before Rémy Sartre opened his detective business here. However, open street warfare to recapture the port city in the middle of a World War still left its marks in stray bullet holes in awkward places and the occasional splash of graffiti higher than street level that hadn't been entirely scrubbed off yet.

They had finally replaced the carpet runner with the three bullet holes on the main floor, although the corresponding small furrows taken out of the polished tile floors were still there. The main staircase to the second floor still had knife wounds in the aging wood, or it might be bayonet marks she didn't really know the difference.

Alek wanted to stop and sniff every mark the building had, which she wasn't really entirely tolerant of until she realized Rémy was with other clients for right now. Waving her minions to stand by the wall, she let the dog get investigating his new surroundings out of his system since there was little else to do.

Her dog was sniffing at a carpet runner for an entire three minutes before she belatedly realized he
was investigating an old blood stain. The cleaning crew did a fantastic job for the size and severity of the apparent stain, but the edges had a faded brown ring that seemed to have resisted the last couple attempts to bleach the stiff fabric clean.

"...huh. Don't lick it, you dipshit." Fuck knew what was on the floor, and how often the dedicated cleaning crew came through. Alek slowly licked the carpet again, seemingly confused by whatever he was picking up.

Sonya plucked him up off his paws, because she knew he was going to try to lick her with that tongue the moment they were back in the rental and she didn't want whatever might be lingering on the floor all over her face. Meaning she was holding about twenty-five pounds of rangy puppy dog in her arms when Detective Sartre finished up whatever his previous appointment was about.

He opened his office door, blinked at her men waiting on both him and her, and absently gave a middle-aged woman clutching a series of old photographs in hand an only slightly distracted farewell and a promise to get on her problem the moment he had a free moment.

The only slightly silvering woman patted him on the arm in farewell while insisting he not stress himself out as her issue had waited almost thirty years already, hobbling off with an almost completely suppressed limp that apparently no one missed at all.

The detective curiously examined the men waiting for him, then glanced at her slightly pointedly. "So, Bazanov or de Mort? I met your brother out in Vancouver, and he didn't seem to be aware you were claiming only one of the surnames he was using."

Sonya would've facepalmed, had she not had a double armful of curious doggo in her arms. "Bjørn, remind me to tell Cherep that an alias for his protection only works if he sticks with it."

Her Lacky coughed to hide something resembling a snicker, pulling out a notepad from his suit breast pocket and marking that down obediently.

"De Mort is the public name I'm going with out and about, and for my books. We have a baby sibling and a nurse for a sister, Soviet citizens aren't exactly welcome in the States or strongly capitalist areas, I've got a godchild, and neither Skull nor I want to heap more attention on him than any child should deal with. And it's Bazanova, I'm a girl." Dropping the dog safely away from the old bloodstain, she pointedly handed Hawk the leash to keep the idiots tethered together and in place. "I'd apologize about the deception... but..."

"For family and personal safety is entirely understandable reasons to adopt a new name. Kids deserve the time to be kids." With a gesture he invited them all into his business office, nodding at the inclusion of the dog when she tilted her head to him in question. "So, Miss Bazanova, what can I do for you today?"

"De Mort on any records, please. And Hawk is why we're here. Total amnesia, we know pretty much nothing about him." Bjørn offered her the paperwork they had from the French Government about re-establishing an identity for unknown persons, as well as the details for the detective to draw a bi-weekly wage while working on this for them, and she took them to place on his desk. Then only she and the prior law enforcement office took seats, her minions opted to stay near the door. "While he's kind of in a legal limbo until the docs make the right reports to the right departments, I need someone to poke into anything they can find on his past history. All I can tell you is I found him in Switzerland while on a slightly sensitive contract, he can speak French well enough a native I also works with insists it's good enough for him to be a native or at least has a past history of living in a French quarter somewhere, and aside the eye color he's not got anything too identifying to his name."
Rémy nodded distractedly, quickly jolting down the pertinent information on his heavily used memo pad and sliding the paperwork she brought him one by one into its own file for documentation after getting a look at what pages were there. "Where exactly in Switzerland."

"Lugano, Ticino Region. Not exactly the town there, a bit outside." Viper had taken exactly as long as possible to get back to her if she could give the location away or not and had pretty much asked in apparently high levels of bitchiness 'mou, why didn't you assume I'd be far away from where I had you destroy it all in the first place'. According to her Lackey.

Had she assumed she could, the Mist probably would've bitched about not being checked with in the first place. Sometimes, most of the time, you really couldn't win when dealing with a Mist.

Sonya seized Alek by the collar before the dog could get in the not-hidden trash can and try eating something that might disagree with him out of there. She gave the private eye a tight smile when he momentarily glanced up at her curiously between lines. "He's still a puppy."

"Big boy for a puppy."

" Barely three months old."

Rémy's eyebrows rose up, even if he didn't look up again from what he was jolting down in slightly curved lines. "He's going to be a big dog, then."

"How can you tell?"

"Three months and already knee-high on you? Odds are his full adult height will be another two thirds his size now. Dogs usually stop growing about a year in. So at least a big boy reaching your hip at the outside, maybe just high enough to get to the top of your thigh instead if you're lucky." Finishing his notetaking with a flourish, he tore off that piece of paper and added it to the file he was building up for them. "Anything else you can tell me about your unknown there? The more I have, the quicker I can rule out the obvious."

"I had a martial arts master of a... contact, poke him a couple times. Might have some knife-fighting experience, haven't given him a gun yet to see if he could shoot, basic brawler tactics. Probably not a mercenary type... might've done a few bar brawls in his time." Sonya shrugged a shoulder, digging her fingers into Alek's ruff to scratch it and keep him contentedly next to her instead of pawing around the man's office. "That's really all we know. 'Hawk' was just what we've been calling him, so if you find a name we'd appreciate it... but if you don't... we still appreciate it."

Rémy glanced up at the man in question, pen poised over empty space on the yellow lined paper. "Anything to add?"

The Storm slowly grimaced, shifting awkwardly near the door. "I can speak a few additional languages, as far as we know. Italian, English, French, and apparently German. Not Russian, not Chinese, and not whatever the L- I mean, whatever Bjørn over there spoke originally."

"Icelandic, thank you."

"Gentlemen, I can and will smack you both upside the head." Three Storms in a little space like the interior of a car?

They were all a bit testy and restless from the drive up here. Thus why she gave them all two hours, including this little meeting that shouldn't take much longer, to unwind before they had to suffer through going back to the castle.
She'd walk Alek around somewhere away, Bjǫrn would be heading back to Mafia Land from the Marseille airport in a few short hours so he'd head off to coordinate her work in a few more days, and Hawk could do whatever he wanted to do.

Sartre gave all three of them a pointedly curious look as he finished up filling out the appropriate boxes in the right places on each piece of paperwork to accept their job offer, and she sighed. "It was a bit of a trip up here, but I'd rather go to someone I know can do decent work with a bare month and pay you to do the independent investigation than someone closer to home I don't know the character of."

"...well, I'm flattered."

"Rémy, without looking out the window, tell me what you see on the roof across the street." Sonya interrupted shortly, very pointedly not looking away from him as she planted both feet firmly even with the two inches of heel and gripped her dog's collar.

Impressively enough not glancing away from her the moment she mentioned it, the detective frowned thoughtfully as he stared at her. His eyes widened first then very slowly he reached for the lower drawer on the right side of his desk and drew out a rather hefty pistol before shutting it again with the butt of the gun.

She pursed her lips in irritation, and suddenly dove headfirst for Alek without bothering with standing up. Her puppy yipped in surprise, which got interrupted with a few barks of protest when both she landed on top of him and the office window was noisily shattered by the bullets shot at her head. Scooping him up on her way the thief ended up on her ass right next to the good detective with a lapful of dog as he, to his credit, focused more of his divided attention on her want-to-be assassins instead of the damage done to his formerly neat office space.

Apparently there was no clear shot available, or he was too civilian to fire in city limits without more prompting, as he leaned back after a frozen moment with his slightly compensating hand-cannon.

She carefully plucked the glass out of her hair, scowling at the trickle of something itchy that informed her she had little bleeding cuts in her scalp somewhere.

"...cousin?" Bjǫrn eventually prompted warily into the silence when it became abundantly apparent that first volley was all they were going to get, likely the pause was him more trying to figure out a way to address her that wouldn't gain more raised eyebrows from this former member of law enforcement.

They had once claimed to be cousins to escape excess scrutiny before. Distant cousins, but it was a convenient excuse to use somewhere they couldn't speak honesty.

"I'm fine." Sonya claimed, ignoring the blood on her fingertips and getting some resistance from the dog when she tried to shove him off to get back up to her feet. Alek gave her a wounded look instead, deciding snuggling was exactly the order of business rather than get off her so she could hunt her idiotic assaulters. She would've contested his idea, had the actual legitimate Frenchman in the room not put a hand on her shoulder to attract her attention then extend it to help her up to her feet.

"Why is someone trying to kill you?"

"...Skull and I have abandoned Soviet Russia, Detective Sartre. It was really only a matter of time until the KGB realized it and came after us." She mustered up a slightly sheepish smile for him as she belatedly accepted the assistance that forced the canine off her, even if that was only honestly about a fifty percent chance it was the KGB instead of someone a lot closer to home taking a target
of opportunity instead. "I apologize about your window."

"Fuck the window, Sonya." Scoffed the man as his other hand went to his office phone, even as sirens started wailing in the distance as everything caught up to someone's brash use of firearms in a city limit. "Anyone else you can think of that might have a price on that pretty head of yours?"

"Do you seriously carry a pair of those boots around everywhere with you?" Hawk butted in with, shooting her a bewildered look as he edged back away from the shattered window he had attempted to peer out of without presenting a target of opportunity.

They were all apparently too suspicious to pass in front of the broken window, even if it was unlikely anyone was watching for someone doing something that stupid.

"Of course I do, I'm not fucking running around in a pair of damn heels." Kicking off the footwear in question and pinning down Alek's leash with her bare left heel so he couldn't go sniff the broken glass once his attention span waned, Sonya hauled on the right boot and tightened the laces with a bit of undue strength that made the metal eyelets heat up. Letting the laces hang, these boots did not go with her skirt and jacket but fuck fashion right now, she carefully transferred which heel was on her dog's leash keeping him from glass shards up the snout or lacerated paws to pull on the other. "As to your question, detective? Start that list with the KGB, fill the middle with any number of 'patriots' in Moscow or now Italy that might have ideas about how I live my life, and end it with any number of criminal smuggling operations I have blown off per company regulations around the world."

Then the Todd famiglia, anyone that knew she and Don Vongola were not particularly friendly but she was helping her mother teach Fiorella how to survive the Mafia, probably a Chinese Triad or two she may or may not have purposely ignored. Whoever back in Moscow that might really want Gedeon's approval or favor for something moderately serious, anyone criminally or not connected in Italy that didn't want Russians as neighbors going for either whoever they could find or specifically her. CEDEF agents that didn't like her embarrassing them in front of the entirety of Mafia Land by breaking into their 'secured' space. Those American groups, one of which she happily murdered her way through that one invasion attempt… that group she might've pissed off trying to 'teach' them, and if they were counting invasion attempts of Mafia Land there was that group attempting it that day Bjorn needed her inventory books for a miscellaneous contract.

Fifty-fifty shot it was the KGB, about twenty percent chance it was the Todds responding to her last salvo, a ten percent chance something in Vongola leaked yet again and someone had ideas about how foreigners should act around their 'home team', five someone in the Zolotovs took a crack of opportunity, five it might be just a target of opportunity aimed more to discourage this man than her, and the last ten percent of chance could just be Verde-hunting orientated.

Tightening down her left boot laces, Sonya spared a moment's thought to those heels but didn't collect them herself. Alek held her heels between his teeth, giving her a patiently pointed look with bright blue leather straps hanging out of his mouth.

Apparently someone was grumpy at being held so close when she didn't want to snuggle. "Good boy."

"Split up?" Posed the detective, finished with assembling himself to abandon his compromised office and do exactly that. Her file was missing from the desk, she hoped he had secured that well enough a hasty toss of this place wouldn't reveal in seconds.

"Probably a wise decision, Hawk, Bjorn, go find McCarthy. Ditch the rental, we'll just absorb that cost instead of risk you three returning it. Then either make your way to the nearest police department or the airport, or out of the city. Whichever is safer for you. We'll meet up either
tomorrow in Genoa, at Nilda's, or at the company office."

From the paired looks shot at her, neither Hawk nor her Lackey were at all that pleased with her orders.

"You could ditch a rental near or next to any beat cop on the street in about an hour and a half, about when I can get news out to keep an eye out for you… three." Offered the good detective helpfully enough, thankfully aiming to pull on a leather underarm holster for his piece than notice the dirty glares he got for it.

Björn folded first, yanking his twitching fingers away from where she knew he had his reversed holsters for a pair of matched hunting knives under his waistcoat. Their amnesiac Storm reluctantly followed suit, probably a breath away from protesting using the whole fact they were gearing him up to be a bodyguard for this exact reason… if just not for her.

Aww… her Lackey was growing up. Obviously, but there was the fact he lived and worked in a place called 'Mafia Land'. Filled with dirty criminals and degenerates, none you would claim to be the best role models for impressionable young men. No one with any damn sense in their heads would trust either her or Viper with any measure of money or valuable items, both she and the Mist would jack it in seconds as a matter of fact.

Instead, Björn could be left with massive amounts of money safety and valued her more than just as a meal ticket even now when he had a life, contacts to support himself with, and several methods to survive her demise with a standard of living. He had personally invested in her, for some reason she could not honestly put a name on, enough to be visibly upset at the idea of assassins gunning after her ass.

Rémy glanced at his wrist watch, counting off a decent head start for the other two before looking back up at her. "I believe you might just still owe me coffee."

"Indeed I do." Sonya allowed wryly, kicking up the loose end of Alek's leash before scooping up her wiggling puppy under an arm. He might not really at all appreciate this, but she didn't want to deal with him snorting up glass shards or lacerated paws. "Would you happen to know the local police office with the best on tap, so to speak?"

"Why, of course."

Taking refuge with the police… damn was life strange sometimes. Might be exactly what she didn't want to do right now, but she had a puppy to mind as well as her current reputation as a 'law abiding author/acquisitions agent' to maintain.

Probably exactly what they were counting on if they missed the shot.

…jackasses.

(ooo0000oo)

(Thursday the 27th of August, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"You are hiding from Verde, aren't you."

"I'm entirely hiding from Verde." Peter the Scruffy admitted to without an ounce of shame, slowly edging into her bedroom as little as he could get away with and still get that protection from the male Lightning resident of the castle. "The man is brilliant, total genius. Just… not very sociable.
Especially not when he has 'ideas' to work on. I'd rather not become his latest test subject, to be honest, and I'm not entirely convinced he recalls that I've rented lab space from him instead of being around for him to experiment on."

"So what, am I your 'default' when you don't want to spend the day with him?" Galina inquired, maybe a touch bitchily. She immediately regretted it when the man blanched the color of soured oatmeal and very nearly had a panic attack in the doorway. "Scruffy, breathe. Deep breath. Several deep breaths."

It could've been her tone, some seemingly innocent happening earlier paired with a sudden confrontation, or just about time for a vivid reminder. Something made Peter recall a likely nasty memory and kicked him straight into 'panicked survival mode'. "I'm... I'm sorry?"

"That's nice. I'd rather you keep breathing than get an apology right now." None too gently steering the Sun to the quaint little couch she bought down in the village to flesh out her personal space more to her taste, she firmly shoved his chest to get him to sit down before he passed out. "Sonya has me working as her editor, and one of the books I should've had another few months to hammer out suddenly needs to be done now and not later. I haven't exactly been a total social butterfly myself the last month or so either, but there is no excuse to take it out on you."

"I'll visit more?"

Galina nearly bit through her tongue in frustration but shoved the feeling aside and took her own advice. "I'd rather you visit to just spend time with me rather than in the aims of ticking a box off a list of requirements, Peter."

He shoved a hand through his grey touched curls, not remotely enough to hide that tremor in his fingers as he slowly scaled down from 'panic' to 'be overly apologetic'. It didn't really help her levels of frothing frustration as she refused to give it an outlet, but Galina knew herself well enough to know if she fixated on it this whole conversation would be heading nowhere but downhill.

For fuck's sake, she was not hitting him. Even lightly or playfully, or to snap him out of his murky memories, which she had tried before. Being given the same treatment he probably relied upon to escape a beating while being held against his will in Africa didn't really do much but piss her off, and Scruffy didn't need her anger. It would just terrify him into holing up and avoiding everyone for a day or two.

"...how about we go down and get some coffee, Peter? Or tea, I suppose there might be some we can borrow off someone." Anything to change the situation, as he consistently did better either somewhere very familiar to him or if that couldn't be done then somewhat less frequently could shake these incidents off while changing locations. Remaining here, after tripping off something, would do nothing but get his nerves twisted into knots as he awaited what she would not do to him.

She wished she could claim magical insight into the coping mechanisms of a former prisoner for how she knew all that, but the truth was she had tripped over this before with him. Several times now, and it never got easier on either of them.

"Come on, I need a break and so do you. Let's go get something to sip and monopolize Sonya's patio furniture for once. We'll watch the sea from the cliffs for a while and catch up, outside. Sea air, sunshine, and for some strange reason something hot to drink in sweltering summer heat." Letting the Sun compulsively grip her right wrist until he felt steady enough to get back up on his feet, the Lightning drew on her strained patience to remain passive. Tripping something else off in his memories would just compound things more to the point she'd have to try again tomorrow instead of get time to talk with him.
"...seven months."

"You're not going to suddenly be as fine as a daisy with a snap of fingers, Peter. I'm afraid to say you might always be at risk for panic attacks or flashbacks, no matter how much time has passed since your last one." Galina informed him pointedly, but with enough gentleness that it honestly surprised her. "I shouldn't have snapped at you."

The grip on her wrist got tight enough to endanger her circulation before Peter forcibly relaxed his hold and focused more on her in the here and now rather than what horrors his mind insisted on showing him. "I did get a little distracted... and getting upset with me for what I've unintentionally done is fine. Should be fine. Maybe we should have breakfast together? At least once or twice a week?"

"I like that idea." Still was kind of ticking her off a list of responsibilities, but she could discuss that with him when he wasn't so high-strung with nerves she unintentionally tweaked with mimicking something horrible in his not-too-distant past.

Then again, with ten years of repeatedly compounded incidents to draw from... it might just take another decade for him to recover as much as it was possible to.

Coaxing Scruffy down past the 'public' levels of the castle, when he really was not at all comfortable being around people in the aftermath of these incidents, was as trying as she remembered it to be. Then again, it was easier this time than the last one where it was the early days of teaching at Sonya's school and he had another of these panicked incidents.

Cesare seemed to have seen more than enough to at least somewhat identify the issue going on at a glance. Unfortunately, the Mafioso wasn't a mind reader and didn't hear her mentally commanding him to keep his mouth shut. "...problem?"

"Ah... no. Can we get some coffee, please? We're just going outside." Galina griped the hand over her wrist to keep the Sun in place and not backing away from this last hurdle to getting free of the interior. "We both need the fresh air."

Ruslana simply pulled out a tray she recognized as the one usually sent outside when Sonya entertained that Vongola assassin that occasionally came around, and although a little put out with her avoidance the assassin decided to return to his work and let them get on with it. Helped along a little by the ringing of the phone line he decided to answer for the greenette.

While dragging Peter past the two, she got to hear Cesare ask, "Just who shot at our Lovely Bossy Dragoness?"

Huh. That was fast.

Three looks, of varying levels of confusion, informed the Lightning that she might've just said that out loud.

"The boss lady's books got wildly popular beyond expectation... in an American market. The KBG, whatever you might say about them, are not stupid. Between that and this property, which with how good Björn might be he can't honestly expect to hide the transaction from spies that catch things like that for a living, it's not really that unexpected." Beyond whatever else the boss had been up to with the Mirror Lady that one night, or anyone else she might've stomped down hard on who wanted a crack at her too.

Peter wheezed quietly at her side, turning now a bit green around the edges. Larion's mother, instead
of finish pulling out the dishes that went with a coffee tray, defaulted to something utilizing the stove and half a jug of milk. Apparently out of concern by the non-Russian's reaction, given the direction of her glances.

Galina had to assume that to him, Sonya might've seemed rather intimidating figure… but she had been on both sides of the woman before. She knew the blonde was a bit of a forgetful ditz, and entirely stone-cold if you just so happened to be on the right side of wrong to her.

Personal experience, the thief had once broken a few bones in her right hand… then promptly forgot all about her. While it was to her benefit now, had she been a lesser woman she could've nursed a grudge.

Now that she lived with the other woman's godson and all, with nearly perfect opportunities once past that indifferent hurdle… if she didn't expect to live mere seconds after attempting anything. It was getting past the walls that made it lethal, not particularly anything within… and the Mists. However there were openings, that pretty much occupied Adrik's day trying to somehow close without nailing Sonya down to a predictable pattern.

She wasn't that petty, but just the mere fact she honestly believed the younger thief had completely forgotten harming her once made for some interesting moments. As well as slightly exasperated, mainly at the blonde's truly terrible memory for people she was indifferent to mildly irked by.

"You really should've been half-expecting this all along, especially when she admitted she didn't want to stay in Moscow when we're Russians." Galina informed the man at her side, tugging him along to relative freedom of the outside through the French doors. "If it wasn't the KGB, there was several other candidates that could send an assassin after her. Have sent assassins after her, our oblivious wrecking ball of a boss who is not gentle slamming her heels on delicate political toes, before."

"All the way to the lower half of France?" Scruffy protested wheezily, although now focusing on something else aside whatever his mind got caught on.

"…well, it's not like anyone will admit the KGB have gotten that far out of Soviet territory. If they get caught... there's always more where they came from." Galina admitted to wryly, finally opening the glass doors to let them outside into some moderately overwhelming sunshine and heat of a late summer day.

( Friday the 28th of August, 1970. Superbi Famiglia Manse, Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

From the widened eyes on Fiorella, Nilda assumed the Lady Vongola hadn't yet realized there were jobs given to all those Mafiosi and hitmen wandering around not only her husband's headquarters but her own husband's Iron Fort.

Jobs like 'hunting a delinquent criminal blowing someone who thought they were more important off'. "Was it the KGB?"

"That's now the 'official' assumption when the report was handed up and the French-Soviet Russia diplomats took over, the USSR is of course denying everything… which means even if it wasn't true now everyone assumes it is. And if it really wasn't, now I need to watch for it because they know for certainty we've gone and abandoned them." Sonya ran fingers through her slightly lank ashen blonde hair, tiredly scrubbing at her scalp. "I'd suggest bringing along a pack of cards or something, I'm not going to be doing much but napping my way back into being well-rested."
"Is it safe?" Inquired the Rain skeptically, because they would be heading into Soviet held territory for this little end-of-schooling trip for Fiorella.

"It'll confuse the issue." Dismissed the thief with a wave of a hand she pulled from her hair, scrubbing of anything up to and including an imagined feeling off on her jeans. "The KGB is so massive that fractions of it can get away without reporting back or even admitting they exist to other branches. And, as it's a spy agency that also works as a secret police force, aside the actual assassination attempts or general suspicion you must work under, it's not that hard to confuse the fuck out of them to inefficiency."

"So... beneficial for you... but for us?"

"You'll become known associates of mine, at least to the Soviet Union, and there might be a slightly increased risk of spies attempting to chat you up. As you've got Mr. Silvery-White's whole famiglia, and Fiorella has the entirely of the Iron Fort, I highly doubt it at all effect either of you rather than your respective groups."

…the possibility of catching any KGB that got local. The spy hunter in her wanted the opportunity, the best way to catch agents like her was to wait until they wandered into your influence on their own.

Glancing to the side, at the middle-aged mother of three looking concerned and worried over the explanation for why Sonya was coming directly from the airport instead of with Ganauche, Tatiana, and her godchild from her place, Nilda had to admit the bodyguard she had been turned into recently wanted to call this off.

When in fact speed would be the key factor keeping the whole trip under any widely spread radars that could spot them, and would foul any smaller ones looking for a juicy target like the Lady Vongola out and away from southern Italia.

The difference between what she knew and what she felt, and what she knew was experience with spies and her newer responsibilities for another woman's well-being made her hesitate.

Nilda wasn't going to let it panic her again, but she still hadn't figured out a reasonable balance between the two.

"What would you recommend, during and after the visit?" Fiorella inquired for them both, with something that was surprisingly not another inquiry to the thief's obvious good health.

"...do most of your future orders through mail. It's easier to sneak one or two individuals up past the Iron Curtain, a large party is a lot more difficult and not often worth it." Sonya considered it for a long moment. "...couriered mail, and make sure whoever takes it can or has jumped the Curtain a few times before. As for this one, just don't take stupid risks and we'll be fine. It's the once that's more or less free, the moment you're suspected of running the blockage it gets chancy as the information spreads to other choke points."

The platinum blonde carefully weighed the situation and this new development. "Aside happenstance that might occur at the border itself."

"...no, not even then. We're going by way of my other workstation, who is giving specific if hellishly expensive flights past certain troublesome 'borders' that you don't want to cross another way. The island's passenger flights, or shipments for that matter, are never stopped or inspected no matter what waters or territories are involved. We're not even going to bother attempting to make a run at the Iron Curtain, but being known to have been beyond it without a collaborating incident will put a
"Nilda?" Fiorella slowly turned to her, apparently awaiting her to give a stamp of approval on the whole trip. She kept her face clear of any expectation, apparently drawing on her years as a criminal-politician's wife to hide her real feelings on the possibility of her trip being canceled. "What say you?"

Nono was going to loath it, but giving the older woman her one last 'defiance' might help her re-assimilate to life in the Iron Fort again. Additionally, being party to this trip would mean Fiorella would be comfortable coming to her for any future mischief she might think up or be suggested to her.

…and Nilda would greatly rather be kept in on the loop if Lady Vongola decided to get willful again. Just look at what she did when offended at being lied to for so long… consorting with Soviets communists and learning hand-to-hand combat tricks. "You, me, Sonya, Tatiana, and Ganauche. And her godson. I'll drop the Superbi men, if our dear lady thief here recommends it will be easier to hide us all under scrutiny without obvious guards. Besides, stealing from a thief…"

"Is never worth it." Sonya finished for her with a smirk. "I'll get it back and then some interest, later. Furthermore, CEDEF has security oversight there… we'll be as safe as… clams."

The woman might've said all the right things, but something rang just a touch off in that last claim. Nilda shot her a look, but either pretending or truly innocent Sonya turned her attention back to the now slightly excited Fiorella. "Tats has been bugging me about this all summer, and I learned of these guys from one of my teachers. The old man is flamboyant, and his assistant has an attitude, but they do some phenomenal work. As in I traveled the world with a Russian Circus, and swear by these boots."

"But only a day, right?"

"We'll overnight in the area, then head back in time for lunch Saturday and well before Sunday Mass needs attendance." Promised the Russian, starting to wander outside. Likely to return to her canine left to stretch out his legs in the backyard, and to indulge in her tobacco habit before her nurse sister arrived. "Your kids won't have the time to miss you, Fiorella."

"Oh no… they'll be too busy twisting Silvano around their grubby little fingers." Nilda snarked at her back, earning a huff of amused laughter from the mother of those children. "I believe the plan is to take them to a pre-season warm up bout of football at the Stadio Luigi Ferraris, Fiorella. Our Genoas against Cagliari Calcios. They'll delightedly bend your ear telling you all about it when we get back."

The woman gave her a slightly wry smile. "Pity their father can't be the one to take them to their first game… although I have no idea how much enjoyment Massimo will get from a noisy stadium."

"…oh, I didn't."

"Don't worry, Nilda dear." Fiorella brushed off simply with a twist of her wrist in her direction. "Timoteo had more than enough chances to take Federico to his first, he simply chose not to. If it was Enrico it would be different, that boy likes races better than football games. Car races in particular, so it wouldn't be as special for him as it would for our oldest. I can't fault Silvano in picking a football game to take the boys to, it is a good idea and will distract them entirely."

It was only occasionally that Nilda wanted to punch Timoteo in the face. Thankfully. Ottavia probably would not be amused by that kind of delinquent behavior out of one of her agents and
would have some strong words for her if she ever tried. Not to mention what the Sky's Guardians might think about the assault on their leader.

…Federico was seven. A bit young for remaining properly close by in high-profile situations like meetings with politicians maybe, but certainly not too young to be taken to a professional game to enjoy with his father. That was what private boxes were for, keeping high-profile visitors all together in easily secured spaces in public venues behind bulletproof glass if need be.
Fiorella bounced slightly with a particularly harsh jolt interrupting the sway of the train, shifting to lay on her side and facing the blonde across the aisle that was enabling this whole trip. "I've never slept on one of these before."

'These' being a train car specifically designed to be used by sleeping passengers on overnight train rides.

At first it had seemed to be just a normal train, with little cubical of benches facing one another stacked back to back and maybe fewer windows to reduce heating cost or maybe maintenance requirements for all that glass somewhere that got so cold. Once the skies turned dark with dusk however, the conductors had come by and helped passengers reconfigure the benches so there were four berths per previous seating area. Some without windows, some with, but each of them easily sleeping four or more full-grown adults the train chugged on deeper into Soviet held lands.

The benches were rectangular green canvases sacks with minimal stuffing nailed to a board with metal brackets, and it was not particularly comfortable by any measure. The Russians they were traveling with had anticipated that and brought along an entire duffel bag filled with nothing but bedding to distribute out. Meaning all four of their little beds had extra padding and blankets, aside the woolen one provided, and at least one pillow each. Fiorella ended up with two when Tatiana decided she'd rather sleep on Ganauche, who was not complaining one bit, and Shamal very considerately gave up his for Nilda claiming he could sleep on his 'mamma' better than on a pillow.

"There's a bit of a trick to it." Sonya allowed wryly, firmly pressing her stocking clad toes into the end of her berth as the young boy snoozed away with his head pillowed on her stomach as he had claimed he would. "Getting used to the motion is the hardest part."

"Noise." Tatiana disagreed from the berth on top of her sister's, shamelessly cuddling further into a sappily smiling Ganauche and giving a satisfied huff when he obligingly moved his arm so she could have sole possession of his entire right side and most of their blanket. "The noise gets to me first, so much clanking…"

"It's all new to me as well, Fiorella." Offered Nilda from the berth below her, if only to share in solidarity with her being new to something apparently so common there were built in beds on special train cars attached to long-distance rail lines to accommodate travelers with. "Although... an... interesting experience. Maybe something I don't want to do again. Or at least, not in public."

Reminded, Fiorella glanced down the main aisle between the berths running the length of their train car. Catching a few suspicious glowers and several backs as other passengers slept on before she pulled her head back into her little quarter of their shared space. "...Sonya, why are we being glared at?"

"The native language around these parts is Ukrainian, Russian, Hungarian, and a bit of Romanian. Italian is obviously foreign to those riding the train with us, and as such suspicious to most."

"Erm... I don't know another language." Which was kind of a serious oversight, she needed to learn a second language by last month. She had two Russian natives as instructors, why wasn't a second or even third language part of that?
"It's fine." Sonya dismissed lazily, with a jaw-creaking yawn. "I get the same dirty looks in Italy, speaking my native language. It's just something that happens when you don't speak the local languages… even if you can't. People get suspicious you're talking behind their backs, directly in their faces. It just happens."

Even as she spoke, the thief carefully twisted herself half-out of her berth and took a pointed look up and down their sleeper carriage. One bare, tattooed arm planted on the carpeted floor and ensuring anyone who tried it caught the full brunt of her unamused expression. Unlike when Fiorella did it, everyone else pretended utter ignorance of any interest in the woman and more in their own individual situations. Rapidly.

"…how?"

"The tattoos are for more than just designating Tats and I as delinquents." Sliding right back into her previous position, yet again somehow not waking her godson, the other woman shuffled things so she could at least cover her right shoulder if not her left due to the child sleeping with her. "We're now in territory where the tats are recognized as the criminal resumes they are."

Fiorella glanced up, but the Lightning cuddling with his girlfriend was already shaking his head. "We don't have anything like that, and I'm not sure this subject is safe…"

"Eh, this is cultural." Tatiana chipped in with from his side, not even bothering to lift her head while joining in on the very blatant conversation. "Vory have to admit when asked if they are vory, so while we do have a Vow of Silence ourselves… we even call it the same thing, it's not quite the same as your Mafioso do."

The Mafioso she was cuddled up to raised his left hand just to rub his face with it. "I don't even want to know how that works out…"

"Without issue."

"…seriously?" Ganauche demanded of Sonya, almost twisting himself off his shared berth to see her clearly had his girlfriend not made a very pointed growling noise warning him against doing that.

"We only met one of the enforcers, the overall ones, a few years ago. After fifty years of nothing." Pointed out the Russian a berth below him somehow both lazily and wickedly. "Which then raises the question, since they don't go racing across the lands arresting us for bluntly admitting who is and who is not a vor… is Omertà actually something they give a damn about? Or only because some took that Vow and others locally will obviously object strenuously to such outrageous acts as violating it in their various interpretations, do they include policing it to avoid… 'wide-scale warfare'?"

Her husband's Lightning Guardian blinked slowly and, from what little of his face she could clearly see from across the aisle and in the dimness, he was rather confused by the suggestion. Leaning over, Fiorella took in her own bodyguard's faintly puzzled expression aimed at the bottom of her bunk.

"Does no one know?"

"I don't believe anyone thought to record if the question had ever been asked." Sonya offered after a moment of thought, even if she was not the one she was asking. "If we did once know. And now… well, asking them questions is a bit hard. And I say this from personal experience, they're not the type of… people, you want to hang around for long."

"Can you ask? You are practically the only one that seriously takes my questions and tries to answer
them… instead of blowing me off with platitudes."

She thought about it more, with a small little frown as she puzzled it over. "I guess… I could. Maybe."

'Maybe'?

Fiorella pursed her lips as she shifted to get more comfortable half leaning over her berth for the night, getting a faint suspicion. "…would you like something in exchange then?"

"Put in a good word with my mother about my teaching, and I'd be happy to pose the question the next time I see one of their enforcers." Admitted the thief easily without a drop of shame, petting her godchild's hair as he slept the sleep of the truly innocent.

As far as a reminder that she was dealing with criminals went, it was very gentle. Amusing too, and actually adorable in that 'I hope my kids still respect me that much at their age' kind of way. However, still a pointed sign that she would not get much for free anymore… even out of her Mafia Home Tutor's daughters. "Entirely possible, I suppose. Given you did to such a good job keeping my progression to a point even Nilda dear down there was satisfied with."

The look she shot her was amused, almost as much as she was herself. "Then I think I can certainly ask, the next available opportunity. Since I'm no longer one of those principals, it might take a few years."

Oh, oh drat. That was right.

From what Nilda had reluctantly informed her of on the topic the 'Vindice' were really just involved between high-level altercations that might've or did come to the attention of law enforcement, between two or more groups of Dying Will Flame users to keep things in control, or nowhere particular at all.

She huffed with an entirely unappreciated pout, before recalling her age and deciding 'pouting' wasn't something she should be doing anymore. "That is not particularly cute of you, Sonya."

"However shall I live with the shame? Oh, right. Without losing a wink of sleep." Deadpanned the thief lazily, cracking one grey eye open to look up at her sideways from her berth. "Speaking of sleeping, Fiorella? You should probably get some rest."

"But… it's exciting."

"And for sleeping."

Smiling wryly, because that very much was a mother's argument used against willful children wishing to stay up past any reasonable bedtime, Fiorella pillowed her cheek against the fabric provided to her and closed her eyes obediently. "But Sonya, it's so exciting."

"And again, in case it has escaped your notice, for the act of sleeping. Almost exclusively, for that matter."

…it was so unfair Sonya could do deadpan snark so well, it suited the younger woman almost to a ridiculous degree. She strained to recall what Enrico tried to argue with her about this very subject before, back when she had been pregnant with Massimo. "But Sonya, how will I know it's exciting if I don't stay up to measure it?"

Her first answer was a snort. "How do you know it won't be equally as exciting asleep as it will be
awake? Have you tried?"

Ooh, that was a good retort. She should remember that for the next time her boys tried that line on her.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 29th of August, 1970 continued. Horatiu's Boots & Leatherworks, Kharkiv, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

"I can do Italian, ladies. Spent a few years learning from the best of your leatherworkers, in a misspent youth running about the Continent." With a dismissive flip of his wrist, the old man introduced as 'Horatiu' dismissed any logistical problems with simple communication raised before it could really begin. "I haven't been to Italy in… oh, several decades. But! I take pride in keeping in contact with a few fellow cordwainers in your shores. Now! My darling of the marvelous legs… I have your measurements, and that of your young man there… but I see three more ladies I have yet to clad in leather… and I suppose you too, young man."

Ganauche scratched at his five o'clock shadow he hadn't risked shaving off this morning, not sure if he was amused or offended by the cheek directed at the entire party. The main reason they were here had claimed the man was 'flamboyant', but he hadn't been expecting this level of… brashness.

"Shamal needs new loafers for the next school year," Sonya informed him while pointing at the young Mist, which prompted the elderly man to wave over the significantly younger apprentice loitering in the background of a well-stocked shop front, "and I just need three more pairs of boots. Two general wear and a pair of white boots like my last black and silver-plated ones… which might need adjustment."

"To be on the safe side, although you are finally of adult size now, we should take your casts as well. Show your friends here how it's done." Decided Horatiu firmly then turning to the next woman nearest him, which was the grinning Tatiana.

"The redhead is my sister, who has been after your boots all summer and wouldn't shut up about getting herself a pair." It made the old man smirk, obviously flattered, even if she shot her sister a mildly irked look for getting in another word before she could finally get what she had been not so transparently after for a few months.

"I, am a nurse. Do you know how long I spend standing?" Demanded his girlfriend with a playful huff, hands on her generous hips and tossing her head back so her braid would hang down her back instead of over a shoulder with little fuss. "Please, oh master of leathercraft, my feet hurt…"

Tutting in almost overblown concern, the elderly man took her hands in his and patted them as he drew her to one side to await whatever his apprentice was assembling in the back there. "Not to worry, my generously curvaceous customer. I shall be your salvation, your succor, and your patron saint of being comfortable while on your dainty little toes providing the same to your patients. I would be simply honored to craft a comfortable set of boots for your work."

Fiorella laughed a bit sheepishly as he turned to her next. "Admittedly I have less serious needs, Master Horatiu. But, if I may inquire… do you make ballet shoes? I recently learned the basics, and intend to keep up with practice the best I can…"

"Of course I can," Scoffed Horatiu, flipping his wrist again as if to dismiss any implication he couldn't make a specific style of shoe. "And slippers in the style of ballet shoes for formal occasions, when leather just cannot match a specific shade of color for a lady's evening wear. Would you like
both? Just the pointe shoes? Perhaps I could tempt you into a set of ankle boots, for I know you Italians are very fond of your short leather boots."

Sonya and Tatiana shared a glance, and the nurse cleared her throat. "We might need to replace ours, our ballet shoes, too... so add that to our order?"

"Say no more, darlings. I shall, and it shall be done as quickly as possible. Although... you are aware of how to break in pointe shoes... yes?"

"Yes." Confirmed the blonde thief blandly, huffing slightly when her sister dug her elbow into her side teasingly. "We'll teach Fiorella on a couple store bought pairs to find her right fit, before letting her break in yours with a hammer and a blow torch."

"And maybe a knife, a bottle of glue, and perhaps a small saw."

Lady Vongola made a strange face, mimicked by Nilda's expression, but even more strangely the elderly man just nodded firmly in approval of their offer before glancing at the confusion on the others' faces with visible amusement.

"When you spend as much time on your toes as a ballerina does, then you can make faces at us." Tatiana informed them all pointedly with a smirk. "Trust me, all ballerinas do this. All of us. Sometimes, we have new pointe shoes for a performance... and need to toss them out afterwards."

"Says the woman who nearly went professional."

"You can't talk to me on this one, baby sis. You practically destroy your shoes every damn time we got a new pair."

Sonya turned to Tatiana and promptly started an argument about how far was too far for 'breaking in' ballerina slippers, defending her decision to almost destroy new pairs as 'more comfortable' and getting the argument of 'they're for keeping us up, not to be comfortable' back.

"Listen to your seniors, my budding ballerina." Horatiu insisted to Fiorella quietly, as to not unduly interrupt the whole argument on techniques to break in, or destroy, ballerina shoes the woman was distractedly following along with. "The right fit is different for all dancers, they will assist you in finding your own."

She tossed him a thankful smile, then slightly changed the subject. "For an additional pair of ankle boots, is there any way to make them easy to slip on and off? It's just... I've got three boys..."

"Good God, woman." Gasped the man theatrically, pressing a veiny and wrinkled hand to his chest. "Why would you do that to yourself? Three boys, and not at least one delicate daughter to dance with? I shall ensure it is so easy to slip on and comfortable to wear so you shall never have to worry about it chasing after your young troublemakers. As well as easy to clean, I have that extra thick cow's leather I can treat to be nearly impervious somewhere in the back...

His apprentice rolled his eyes behind his back, giving over two tubs of something greyish and gooey to the younger Russian sister and presenting the other two in his arms for Shamal to make use of. Sonya took a seat on a lone stool to allow her feet to be measured by specialized plates he recalled being used by his cobbler before, before sticking her feet into the tubs as her godson got his measurements taken.

"Um... I'm just here to guard Fiorella's back." Offered the lone Rain in the group when she became aware there was a pointedly inquiring expression being pinned on her, drawing Ganauche's attention back to the owner of this little half-hidden shop.
"A pair of my usual order." Sonya interjected wickedly as she glanced over, balancing half-off the stool to suspend her feet into the gooey mess in the tubs without help like the apprentice was giving her godchild. "Black with silver detailing, and knee high."

Horatiu nodded firmly, grandly gesturing the Lady Vongola's bodyguard to join the procession of women apparently getting their feet casts taken.

The Lightning Guardian attending to his Sky's wife's safety smirked wryly when he became the sole object of the elderly man's attention. "I just need to know who to pay to give my girlfriend a special present for her next birthday."

"A man with fantastic taste… I suppose it could happen." He sniffed back, a wry smirk on his own face as he kept looking him full on even after acknowledging the missing eye and eyepatch covering the empty socket. "My fine young gentleman, can I tempt you into experiencing some quality yourself?"

"Entirely possible." Half because he came prepared with two paychecks and a significant 'bonus' he won gambling with a couple of the bored Mafia School staff standing by for any summer emergencies, and half because he rather liked this 'acknowledgement but not shying away' thing when it came to someone realizing he was a little bit maimed in the face. "One black and one in brown leather?"

"Shoes not boots, pointed toes, and perhaps steel caps hidden inside?"

Hmm… idea. "Steel toes would be good, very good."

He could electrify the metal, and kick just about anything with no worries with Hardened steel covered toes. A very damn good idea.

Would sort of cut down any further worries of solid gold battle axes cutting his foot in half because he said just the wrong thing around his girlfriend's sister. Not quite the worry of the lithe blonde would turn his spine into a coat rack, or his ribs into her soup spoons. Hardened leather couldn't resist enough shearing force to be as useful as straight Hardened metal could.

"Can I get something to hide a small blade in with that? Just to help keep my lady friend safe in chancy neighborhoods, you understand."

"Done." Agreed the elderly man, almost shockingly quick in how easily the craftsman capulated to practicality over fashion, with a businesslike nod. "Join the ladies, if you would. I have much work to do, and some pairs of pointe shoes to start with."

Sonya had just given up her stool to Fiorella only to seat herself on the floorboards in order to pull her shoes back on, and Shamal had finished well before his godmother due to being a tetchy brat. Both had bare feet speckled with some dried gray matter, and the old man's apprentice was taking away a pair of large and small tubs with more drying gray stuff marked with feet depressions. Likely to bring back another set, for Lady Vongola's measurements.

Nether Italian woman had expected to need to remove their footwear, or stockings, this morning when they kicked him out of their cubby of a sleeper berth on the train to get dressed for the day. Tatiana had only belated started stripping her shoes off for her casts to be taken about the same time as them, reminded about the purpose of their visit to this little half-hidden store in the middle of a lower-class neighborhood somewhere deep in the Soviet Union.

Before he could blink Ganauche got a handful of shoes to guard shoved on him, as well as three
pairs of stockings draped over his other arm, well before he even finished wandering over to the rest of the group. He quickly sorted through the pile to ensure Nilda's stockings weren't confused with Tatiana's, they had the same shade of sheer dark stockings as the other, or that he didn't give the wrong shoes back to the wrong woman. Once ensured he wouldn't jumble things up, even if it all was practically pitched at his chest without care, he let his eye wander around the stocks of leather contained in their own cubbies along the back of the store and the example shoes left out for contemplation.

…that was a lot of leather stocked in cubbyholes built into the back wall. A lot of materials, leather and bolts of cloth both, and somehow the whole shop was practically empty except for their group. Some of it was set up to show off the old man's skill to prospective shoppers, but as was kind of the norm for everything since they landed in Ukraine that was only a small part of the 'shop front'. Most of it was workbenches and tool stands, waiting to be used to turn all that material into shoes and boots.

Probably, most of the man's work went through the mail or trusted routes. It made the recommendation Fiorella was given, to have any further orders couriered instead of coming back in person for another pair of shoes if she would like, make a bit more sense in 'business practice' way rather than just the logistical issue of getting around the Iron Curtain might impose. As empty as the shop front was, he had to be doing some real good business to afford the stock of leather and cloth…and, it was highly likely there was even more stock of goods in the back part of this place.

The old man and his apprentice wouldn't keep going back there if all their stock and supplies were in this room.

"I first learned of Horatiu when I joined the same traveling Russian circus our brother joined."
Sonya confided quietly to the group as Fiorella let herself be measured by plates with sliders for length and width across both the ball of and the heel of her bare feet by the so far still unnamed but surprisingly efficient apprentice that already had Tatiana's feet being casted at the same time. "Crina, my master of mysticism and Romanian native playing up the gypsy angle to tell fortunes across the world, gave me a pair of her old boots when the heel of one of mine fell off."

The elderly man sniffed loudly in the back, obviously eavesdropping so all that leather and fabrics showcased against one wall didn't muffle a whole lot, coming back through a stockroom door with arms full of paper and several bottles of what looked to be a homemade glue strangely enough. "Shoddy work."

"They kind of were. Got them in Moscow, so quality wasn't exactly what they were made for."
Blandly admitted the thief without shame at a more normal volume, helping her sister out of the gootubs so Nilda could have her turn. "Anyways. His old, battered, excessively broken in pair of boots were more comfortable than those shoddy boots had been brand new. So I bothered Crina about stealing her boots for about two years..."

Another theatrical sniff of disapproval by the man gluing sheets of paper together, when he claimed to be working on those dance shoes. Or maybe the noise was false disapproval, when in fact the old crafts master was flattered?

He was very flamboyant, as claimed. It made it a little hard to tell what was exaggerated for effect and what the man really felt about something. Half intentionally and probably half unconscious, result pretty much was the same in the end.

"...until the old bat brought me by. I have worn a few other pairs of shoes, and boots, over the last year and some and have regretted it every damn time."
Fiorella gifted the thief with a sweet smile, absently accepting her stockings and shoes from Tatiana as his girlfriend unburdened him of the items he had been entrusted with holding. "Thank you for sharing it with me, even if it means you have to share your boot maker with a few others..."

"I did teach you something, however short a summer is for instruction." Reaching for the brown leather boots that were apparently made here, Sonya reshed her feet and tightened the laces to tie up before accepting the hand up her godson held out for her.

Ganauche suspected the woman used her own strength instead of relying on the boy's, given how little Shamal was strained to get his godmother back to her feet. The Storm-Cloud then led him off to a little sitting corner tucked away in a corner conveniently out of sight from the slightly dingy excuse of a front window, bringing out a book from her purse to share with him as they waited on the rest of them and probably the old guy's current project.

Who had clamped the stack of paper layered between glue with some wooden clamps and was shaving the sides of it with an apparently sharp knife. Which, actually, now sort of looked like the point of a very flat toed shoe he had been building up.

Given Horatiu had a bolt of light pink satin splayed out on that same work table as he started up another set of paper-glue-paper trapezoid shape, the Lightning Guardian figured the pointe shoes ballerinas wore when dancing had paper padding the tip. That did kind of make sense and would give them something to support their toes and balance upon when standing on them.

…that was still a shit-ton of paper and glue. To dance on.

The apprentice came back into the main work room holding several marked sheets of felt, probably the soles of the shoes given the shapes drawn on one side, gave it to his master by leaving the material next to his elbow and coming back to release Nilda and Fiorella from their gooey prisons and to likely measure their feet.

Sighing, Ganauche shut his eye. He didn't even notice the kid leaving the room to fetch the felt, however distracted he was with how ballet shoes were going to be made.

So much for Lightnings being able to notice everything.

"Hey." Tatiana pressed warm fingers to the side of his face with an eye left, rubbing his temple lightly to relieve some of the stress probably showing there. "Relax. What's wrong?"

Everyone else was distracted with books or getting their feet measured, so he answered her honestly. "I've got half the view range of a normal man, and still can't keep track of everything I was used to notice a full year and some after losing an eye."

"You know what you need to do then, right?"

"Retire?" He asked, half sarcastically and a tiny bit afraid of that exact suggestion being given to him by anyone.

"Nope. Cheat your ass off." His girlfriend informed him pointedly, slapping the side of his face a little hard as apparently she didn't appreciate his flippant response. "Why the hell are you playing by any rules in the first place? Don't you work with a... well, the dark blue one? Can't he help you keep an eye on things until I have a green light to try some exploratory and possibly just on one side of legal surgeries?"

"Uh..."
"If not him, find one you do like and can work with. They might not be as common as lighter blues, but it shouldn't be hard."

Ganauche shifted everything to his left arm, ensuring nothing got tangled or mixed up while doing so, then caught Tatiana's hand to press kisses to her fingertips. "I don't deserve you."

After a beat, he realized the only reason why her baby sister hadn't chipped in her two additional pieces of opinion on whether he deserved her older sister was because Sonya was not in the shop anymore.

"…where did your sister go…?"

"Went to go deal with the KGB tail we picked up." Offered the lone Russian without an ounce of alarm in her tone, a slightly wry smirk creeping across her lips when his sole eye widened with it. "Our turn to get stuck in some goo, Ganauche. Shoes off."

(Monday the 31st of August, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Cesare poured himself another glass of the red wine he was testing, unsure if the very robust and somewhat sour red would go well with the prime rib roast he was contemplating making for Wednesday night. "While I was aware it was possible, Lovely Bossy Dragoness, I must confess… I have never seen anyone actually burn pasta when attempting to boil it before."

"Cesare, shut up."

Glancing to the side, almost under Shamal's right elbow, at the plate of discarded lasagna sheet pasta… he marveled at the physical result of said rumored but never before seen happening. Three of them, all of which were burned a yellowish brown somewhere on one side each instead of being softened by the hot water. Somehow.

Poor stirring habits, obviously… but she did stir the pots. He watched her do so. Then again the boss had 'stupidly bullshit super-strength', her words, so putting a spatula or spoon through mere metal cooking pots was probably a real worry for her.

With a soft snort, he sipped his wine and relaxed against the kitchen island again to enjoy the rare opportunity he had to watch someone else cook for him. It wasn't like there was any other reason to watch, he already knew full well she used something else aside the straight ground beef he had stocked for tonight. More than two-thirds of it was left alone, and two-thirds of the ground beef needed to make enough lasagna for the whole castle's current residents?

He'd be making a lot of ravioli for lunch tomorrow. A lot of it… or perhaps meatballs?

There was that mention by that Italian-American who visited his last restaurant job, about 'meatball subs' and his regret they were not found in their native lands. He wasn't exactly sure what meatball subs were, but experimentation might show him why the guy had wished for the dish.

Sonya prodded the meat mix she had just drained and was now simmering warily, belatedly stirring in the almost basic tomato sauce she made at the same time as the cheese. Then she abandoned the skillets to work the meat without her and turned back to laying out the sheet pasta in the assembled sextuplet of lasagna dishes awaiting her efforts.

She had spent all of ten minutes before even touching an ingredient picking his brain about how to
scale up recipes to feed her entire castle residence, then bugging him to add at least ten percent more on top of that for 'just in case'. Only after that starting in on the more complex components of tonight's main fair, almost half an hour ago.

He hadn't really understood the depths of her belief that she couldn't cook, until the pile of ruined ingredients at her godson's elbow started growing.

The issue may very well be just a propensity to burn what she tried to cook, but he was of the opinion she took too much care to the point of hampering her efforts. Kitchen utensils could be delicate, true… but the main pieces shouldn't be.

Well, to everyone but her. Apparently. He highly doubted cast iron pans would prevent an accidental piercing by wooden spoon when they were in her hands.

There was an entire pot of ricotta cheese that somehow turned out blackened, and he had watched her burn it without cottoning on that it might very well be burning half the room away. The bottom layer at least, then when she stirred it to check the constancy it had dredged the charring bits to the surface to mix with what could've been saved had she found out another way. That pot had been joined by the three sheets of burnt pasta more recently and, given her absolute absent minded preoccupation with making everything lay just so in the pans, he suspected they'd get either an entire skillet or parts of each one added to the pile here shortly.

Cesare's offering of making garlic bread had been accepted by the woman intent on making dinner tonight, but he had some time before he had to slice the Italian bread and suitably doctor it in order to ensure it was as warm as the main course when served. He highly suspected they would be having salad with dinner tonight, if only because it was a cold dish she couldn't then somehow burn too.

Aside missing how she ruined the leeway she had figured out with his help, his main reason for parking his ass on one of the new pine bar stools set they had placed around the kitchen island was to catch what Renato had done to his lasagna recipe to make it so damn good. Which he already failed in, because the thief wasn't naming anything she had bought specifically. He might be able to ask the local butcher what it was, and intended to do so bright and early tomorrow, but hearsay and rumor matched up poorly against confirmed facts.

Shamal had joined him because apparently this was his favorite dish of all time, which he entirely appreciated. There really wasn't much better than one's mamma's home cooking, expanded a little to account for everyone else needing to be fed or not… and ten percent more just so she had the flexibility to screw up in.

Pausing, half the baking pans filled with the bottom layer of pasta and the base drizzle of red sauce, Sonya turned back to the meat and stirred it all up. Likely in hopes of preventing something else from burning before she forgot about it all. Then she just reached in and grabbed a tiny bit with her bare fingers, turning around and offering the chunk of meat to her 'official taste tester'. "What do you think?"

Shamal at least conjured up a spoon to take the morsel by, blowing on it twice before popping it in his mouth. "Mmm…"

"Lovely Bossy Dragoness, food safety. Please." He even offered a charming smile to go with his reminder, getting an eye roll back was uncalled for. "You have a pet canine, who knows how much dirt and germs are on your fingers."

"I just washed them, so there."
Then cracked the eggs to make enough of the ricotta cheese for tonight's dinner and chopped various vegetables to put into the recipe she was working on, his point still stood. Just under boiling temperature pinch of meat or not, one should have clean hands before testing their food.

Preferably with utensils rather than with fingers, but hey. Whatever she wanted to do, and the brat would accept.

"…hey, mamma?" Inquired the young Mist at his side, kicking his little feet back against the stool he was perched upon as he posed his questions after the absent hum of response. "Did you forget something?"

"I… don’t…? Think so." Backtracking to the stovetop and the meat sizzling away, she glanced over the skillets and belatedly turned down the heat under one of the hobs to match suit with the rest… before she could likely burn that whole skillet's worth of filling. Another few seconds were spent prodding the tomato stained meat before she made a tisking sound. "Yeah, yeah I did. Good catch, brat."

Upon saying so, the woman then walked right out the half-open back door, left that way in hopes of catching an early-evening breeze or two to prevent the more purely human of their number from overheating without those magical Flame abilities so many here had.

Cesare blinked over the rim of his wineglass and gave a questioning look to the co-conspirator in learning this recipe at his side.

Who smugly stuck his tongue out back, the colossal brat.

Sonya eventually wandered in again, before he had to rescue her simmering meat, with what seemed to be half the freshly planted parsley crop from the kitchen garden in her hands. "So… two minced tablespoons per dish, suppose I just add them to each skillet for everyone? Or reduce it a bit, as this might get mixed up and be too strong…"

"…parsley. Minced parsley. That… That motherfucker-"

There was an entire unamused glare pinned on his person from the chef tonight, narrowed and very pointedly awaiting the Mafioso to try and finish that. She was the mother in the room, and there was a few more somewhere deeper behind them if he took a moment to think about the implications to that curse.

"Present company excluded, and go with a tablespoon and a half per skillet." Cesare backtracked hastily, coughing lightly and acknowledging the lady's highly disgruntled point with his glass of wine. "But really. All this mystery, for what I suspect is veal and minced parsley."

The Lovely Bossy Dragoness still eyed him severely, but eventually returned her attention to the plants in her hand and figuring how to mince them using the cutting board and the entirely wrong knife.

Well, it was sharp and cutting… but serrated to easily carve up breads rather than to easily slice through sometimes tough plants. There was a paring knife not two meters away from her in a part of a set she retrieved the bread knife from, and a chef's knife in a drawer just below where she had the cutting board positioned as well.

She solved the issue by delicately and systematically pressing the knife into the cutting board, leaving deep scars on the block of solid wood but at least somewhat separating the herb into ragged strips.

Hmm… if some of that extra meat was ground veal it didn't account for everything, if he was
recalling the late hitman's special lasagna recipe right. However, narrowing down the suspect list made it more and more easy to guesstimate that last missing puzzle piece until he worked it out fully. Obviously another meat-type, given he had sat here and watched everything she put into the component parts of the recipe and the only thing he hadn't bought himself was the butcher's fair she brought in.

Parsley did rather confound the issue greatly. It was a common seasoning, hence why they had some growing in the kitchen garden plot. Fresh ingredients were a boon, in truth…

"…Lovely Bossy Dragoness? Did you wash that before chopping it up?"

Sonya shot him a look over one tattooed shoulder, apparently not appreciative of his interjection halfway through adding her very ravaged parsley mash a spoonful at a time to the meat. "…no."

Oof.

Cesare hummed, it was that or laugh himself sick, and busied himself with his wineglass again. "Hopefully the heat will kill anything, but really now. Food safety and all that."

"I will throw you out of the kitchen if you do not SHUT. UP. Cesare."

"I will be the soul of discreet from here on, I swear." There wasn't much else she could either burn or contaminate, all that was left was pulling the meat off the heat and making up the lasagnas to finish baking for an hour and a half.

Ruslana had ceded her side of the kitchen for their boss' use, and while he was entirely enough of an asshole to prefer watching someone else deal with an issue he didn't have a hand in creating… he figured he should probably help the lovely woman clean up after the blonde's food-related mishaps. Some of that, especially the burned cheese filling, would need a bit of elbow grease to scrape off the metal before scrubbing them down and set out to dry overnight.

Draining the last of his wineglass to discard with the half-empty bottle of wine on the kitchen island, the assassin got up to finish his parts of tonight's meal. The garlic bread, perhaps some leafy greens tossed in dressing and sprinkled with croutons and parmesan, and then maybe something with rice in it for the Chinese pair.

Old man Yaozu and little miss Mingxia were less adventurous than the Russian contingent of the castle, at least when it came to culinary explorations. If it didn't look very familiar to either, they were very charry about tasting or eating whatever it was on offer for any one meal. Keeping them stocked with the staples of their homeland for the girl to cook up if either truly were hungry was somewhat tricky, and as a chef he was a little insulted at their lack of faith in his art.

On the other hand, as a Mafioso, he entirely appreciated and respected their slow progress on trusting his food. Hence why he was going through the somewhat difficult process of finding Chinese ingredients to keep Mingxia's cupboard stocked.

(Tuesday the 1st of September, 1970. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

Glancing up from the proposed itinerary for his lady's proposed stealing spree next week, Bjørn eyed the tiny workroom's door suspiciously as the knob rattled slightly.

There was only a tiny desk, some shelves to fill out with abandoned paperwork or knickknacks, and
a chair. Oh, and a table lamp taking up part of the desk that dominated the workroom. In this little
three meter by four meter cubbyhole of a office room, the door was practically in his ear to start with.
Even more interestingly, he was in the part of the office building normally reserved for working
thieves and their supporting agents to plan in safety.

Meaning in almost totally assured privacy.

The woman that tested it, and then let herself into his already cluttered Lackey's workroom without
waiting for him to acknowledge or otherwise indicate he was receptive of any company, matched
him annoyed glare for reproving look. "I need two seconds, supposedly."

Tsk. Italians.

"May I inquire about what?"

A black leather folder was presented for him to see momentarily, and the probable hitwoman or
assassin then made a whole production of perusing the contents to some specific passage. Ensuring
the light behind him shined over that glossy black animal hide and revealed the alchemical symbol
for arsenic stamped into it between her fingers.

…admittedly a good visual explanation of her entire presence, but the Lightning-Storm was aware
his lady was fine. He called her this morning, spoke to the Sword Emperor about the majority return
on his investments not two hours ago. The master assassin hadn't said anything alarming was going
on, and he suspected the Mafioso was at the very least keeping an eye on the settling Storm-Cloud
for surprise 'growing pangs' in her territory acquisitions. Holding or possessing the death benefits
paperwork for a Mafia Land employee entirely explained what this unintroduced visitor was doing in
the middle of a guildhall she didn't belong to, but not why she was seeking him out rather than
another Lackey available for outside work somewhere else.

"Renato Sinclair listed your patron as a beneficiary and there's a convoluted mess of notations in his
hand to, and I'm summarizing here, 'clarify the last beneficiary through her on risk of decapitation or
total immolation'. I know most of the others listed, just not this 'last' one named only as 'Tringali'."
The leather file was slapped closed softly, and the blue-eyed brunette gave him a very pointed look
almost demanding an explanation as she held it in a way he could not miss the island's markers
embossed almost invisibly into the leather.

…Sinclair was dead?

Bjørn took a full moment to fully absorb that news, the hitman-orientated one not this woman
looking for his patron's godson by his 'legal' surname bit. "…huh."

Sinclair was 'officially' dead, to the point realistic efforts by security and the law sharks couldn't even
maintain suspicion he was alive somewhere very far away. Mafia Land had professional
investigators and info brokers specifically trained up to catch out criminals pretending to be dead for
whatever reason, personal or business related, and it had to be some measure of time ago for now to
be the point they were throwing in the towel.

Actually… the timing was a little… questionable. He hadn't heard this yet, so not very many Italians
were carrying tales from their native land back to the island to feed the rumor mill…

Either it hadn't been a very impressive death or worth it to gossip about, or a blatantly obvious one
no one wanted to draw massive amounts of attention to.

If he recalled getting his benefits listed out right, because there was an entire well-rehearsed spiel
given when he was formally listed as Sonya's Lackey, the 'investigations' should take a month or
two. More than enough time for Björn to hear one of the island's more prolific and highly
womanizing hitmen had bit the big one, and all about how the residents speculated on why. Probably
enough time between the moment of dying and then being declared officially dead by the criminal
factions in control of the island for the rumors to cycle through twice, ensuring everyone who might
benefit or lose something by the death had the chance to collect if they were 'gone on business' when
the news broke.

It couldn't have happened two months ago, or even one as 'obvious or claimed with suitably personal
trophies to display' incidental deaths got ruled. Mainly that delay happened for someone to
'miraculously survive' and pop back up to kill their former attackers, for said attackers to finish going
through whichever knot of criminal types to hopefully kill any 'beneficiaries' before the island had to
pay out to them, or just to check that was what really happened and they really did have to pay out
the death benefits… and not random similar criminal type number three instead of their contractual
employee.

Perhaps it was different for those that left the island of criminally intensive networking than for those
not expected to leave for long if at all. Or to rephrase that a little… for those that took on the island's
bloodier work for a living than those that supported them in various ways.

He should ask his lady later, without hopefully triggering any lingering grief over her former best
friend's not-too-recent fate.

"…alright. Yes, I can help you. If, though, I may ask… who are you?"

The woman had not graciously waited out his thought process, Lightning-fast it might've been or not.
Instead of answering his question, which really should've been done first just to be polite, she started
in on something else. "I'm still wondering how a thief's Lackey can help me out at all, insistent as the
agent might've been for me to start here and not where I know most of the others are."

Björn gave her a tight smile as he systematically filed and compiled his work into an easily stored list
for clearing out of the workroom earlier than he planned on. "I believe you already listed the reasons
why. You cannot be that blind or stupid, not if you've survived here for any measure of time."

The Italian beauty in the doorway cocked an immaculately perfect eyebrow, folding her arms across
her chest with the file still in them even if that pushed up her moderate chest up and gave him a nice
view of her cleavage peeking out the low neck of her long-sleeved shirt. "Ballsy, little Lackey. I'm
Natalina, one of Renato's old… acquaintances and fellow hitwoman."

"Equally as obviously, I am a Soviet Storm-Cloud's Lackey and general money man. Named Björn,
Miss Natalina." He snapped his fingers together, uselessly as it was will and not a physical skill, to
light a fingertip with ruby red Flames. "This is why you were asked to start with me, and not your
other associates. Hence, 'immolation'. My Dama has the same skill, and one other that is trickier and
everyone on this island has ensured everyone knows about before dealing with her. She is why you
are warned about 'decapitation', for walking into that situation without knowing what is at risk is
how."

"More of you fucking Flame users." Was the hitwoman's opinion, sounding archly disgruntled as
one side of her lips pulled downwards. "Renato was way too interested in you lot."

"Given he was one himself, and you also shared a skill set with him, you should understand why."
Not that he liked the former hitman much himself, but his lady had. Given how long ago rumor had
their acquaintance starting at, the Italian Sun Flame user had probably been one of the first ten if not
two other Flame users Sonya found. "Would you mind waiting a week, or do you wish to start in on
your duties straight away?"

The curly haired brunette, and it was rather improbable how pretty the woman was by appearance alone with the beauty mark high on one cheekbone and classical Italian features matched with an almost flawless complexion, obviously weighed her options carefully… for all of three seconds. "Why was I sent to you if you are going to just advise on either option? I can guess just fine, thank you."

"Good luck with that." Acting as if to pull the recently closed file to continue his work, he wouldn't with an unknown in the room however good it made as a distraction to mime, earned him a disgusted huff. "Either be called ahead, and risk it, or wait for an introduction. You can pick either option."

She, because this was very obviously the 'testing' part of the introduction where she was figuring out how much of him was hot air and how much of a threat she had to respect him as, unfolded her arms to wave that black leather file about. "How about you give me a straight answer as your contract as a Mafia Land Lackey demands, and not rely on mostly baseless rumor mongering to force your own way?"

"I am required to give nothing about my Dama's personal or private life away to just any old contracted worker that asks for it." Interjected the Lackey dangerously, pulling somewhat harder on his emerald side in preparation for this to possibly become physical if she tried pressing further. "Demand all you want, hitwoman. It will net you nothing."

It would suck to pay the repair bill if he slightly broke the room and some of the hallway outside of it, but Sonya likely won't mind once she learned why he would have to.

"A very loyal, ballsy Lackey. Fine. I'll play this game." Natalina offered pleasantly, seemingly very pleased with his hostility… at least on the surface. "If it isn't entirely necessary, I'll come back to extract the price of running me around out of your hide."

Björn snorted derisively at her threat. He was a Lightning, physical harm was tricky to cause them. His patron was a Cloud, with a newly confirmed and now repeatedly documented habit of piking heads. As far as warnings went, you couldn't get more blatant than 'immolation or decapitation' written by one of her own former contact's hands.

This woman was either doing the criminal equivalent of kicking the tires before test driving some situation/prospective contact or testing his tolerances for anyone inquiring about his clients, irreverently ignoring how he'd think of her afterwards. Very arrogant of the hitwoman to assume he wouldn't be able to turn this back on her, or that she could get away with it without serious consequences.

…then again, most of them were arrogant. Himself included these days.

Snagging everything he had been working on, because that was a lot of effort he was certainly not going to just leave lying about for anyone to wander in and glance through, he tucked it up under his arm and he gave a roll of his wrist to the far end of the hallway behind her. "Lead on, then. I merely need a phone to confirm your visitation will be allowed, then I'll give you the address."

Perhaps he could, very politely because she appreciated manners the most, ask Anna the Mirror Lady to intercede on his behalf. Just a friendly, non-lethal reminder to watch her damn attitude when attempting to strong-arm herself more information before diving into a new situation with relative unknowns.

The woman shifted back and to the side, smartly not turning her back to him after all those threats
and demands she just tested him with. He still gave her a crocodile's grin as he followed her out of the tiny workroom into the very bland office hallway, because if she wanted the lead in everything then she'd have to turn her back to him to not 'follow him' to the phone lines.

How much was her pride worth?

(Mono000000)

(Monday the 31st of August, 1970 continued. Boardroom, Building Y63, University of Zürich, Zürich, Swiss Confederation.)

Jabbing himself in the thumb with the needle, for the third time that same hour, an Inverted Sun Flame using Italian Mafioso currently going by the name ‘Ranier Scarano’ critically examined the cloth in his hand as the tiny pinprick closed before he could stain the fabric with any blood.

Not that it would be very hard to get it out, period-correct fabric already artificially stained with age or freshly bleached. Different requirements, and ingredients, but possible. It was just… more expedient when in a room full of civilian college-goers to avoid the whole issue entirely.

Also, it kept ticking down a handful of calories he had to burn off each day to do this whole farce of being yet another safe civilian attending higher education without getting… antsy.

"Well… you're working hard." Observed one of the drama club members overseeing the amateur efforts in mending their slightly damaged or more stock costumes, sliding his ass over on the desk the gunslinger had his supplies neatly laid out on without much care for what he might be disturbing.

"Not your first sewing job?"

"…no." Swallowing down the impulse to kick the brat off the table or snarl his response out with all the irritation he felt at the unwanted interruption, the Mafioso masquerading as a college student cocked his head to the side as he pinched the last stitch between two fingers to prevent it loosening on him. "Did you need something?"

He wasn't here for chitchat with the building number of students starting to collect on campus for the next scholastic year, but for usable experience and information. His academic advisor hadn't managed to cram something in last minute just before semester started as he rather half-expected, so finding something tedious enough to keep him in place but suitably distracting to require his entire attention on what he was doing was hard enough without unscheduled interruptions.

Sewing was not particularly his favorite chore, but one he was familiar enough with. However, given the moment he could barely afford it he got himself a bespoke tailor… learning the 'proper way' to hem up a cuff or repair the wear exerted on articles of clothing when a tailor wasn't on offer was kind of something he had been intending to do for a while.

It just never was very important when money could solve that issue in a pinch, then Shamal happened…

The problem was that he didn't have excess money to throw around on the style he had become accustomed to now, with needing to afford the price of all those classes and workshops Oppliger threw at him in volume with limited forewarning. Budgeting to keep himself fed was going to be interesting, paired up with his academic advisor stuffing his schedule with every little bit of useful extras to 'help' him on his way.

Hence why, in a rare off night unspoken for weeks in advance, he was sitting here. In a conference room, in a public library, having attended a seminar on sewing techniques before being given a
length of thread and a needle to practice repairing the extras' costumes the drama club had almost
thrown out last year. They provided snacks for it, and he was entirely opportunistic to take advantage
on something he intended to get anyways just to milk his last two francs a bit longer if he needed to.

"You're Scarano, right? I've heard that you're trying to get a master's in mathematics in as few
semesters as possible..." Observed the younger man pointedly, jerking a thumb behind him that the
small pile of mended clothing the older Italian had worked through before the interruption. "But ever
think of going into costume design?"

Ah, the child had a reason to interrupt him. A self-serving one, how comfortable.

"That doesn't exactly go well with a master's degree in mathematics." He posed noncommittally,
dropping his gaze and examining the remaining gap in the rip in the cuff of this very old-fashioned
style shirt he had made decent progress in closing.

"Eh, everyone needs a hobby." Grabbing his last mended garment, the linen sailor's baggy slacks
with economical if not suitably hidden stitching closing a gaping rip going from the left hip to knee,
the civilian waved it in front of his face. "And seriously, this is better than what most amateurs can
do."

A misspent childhood sewing up his and the others' clothing contributed, as well as the occasional
help holding a wound close to heal up when it was bad enough. He wasn't particularly fond of those
memories, nor the twitchiness that got into him when he sat down for three hours trying to hem and
repair rags into something halfway decent at a glance.

So... no. Not particularly something he wanted to do with a rare free night. Except... he was here
doing this on such a specific night in the first place, for a reason. Aside the free calories.

"If you want me to work on something more specific... you can bring that up to Oppliger for my
time." Unfortunately, he was here at all to get the rust knocked off a skill and polish his grasp on the
ability. If there was an opportunity to improve it more than just general practice on tears or strain on
clothing he had yet to cause himself naturally, then skipping it kind of went against the whole reason
he was attending college in the first place. "Otherwise, I believe I'm going to be a bit too busy for
learning costume design to the point of being at all useful."

Baby Leon, apparently waking from his post-dinner nap in his unruly hair, pressed tiny claws into
his scalp to let him know the half-Mist Flame lizard needed something. Sticking his needle into the
cuff of his half-mended garment, the gunslinger unbent himself from his picked chair in one
abandoned corner for the first time in a few hours to rise to his full height and stretch out his spine.

"...damn. Why would you do that to yourself?" Obligingly giving him space, probably more for him
to lay down the partially mended costume piece and less to respect his personal space, the still
unnamed senior drama club member folded up the canvas pants in his hands. "The last guy to try
getting Oppliger's help ended up switching majors and then universities to just get away from him."

"I am utterly unsurprised." Drawled the Mafioso dryly, tucking the needle into the remaining work
needing to be done on this scrap of fabric before putting the work down for the night and probably
someone else to pick up and finish later.

His academic advisor helping others the same way as him before soothed at least two itchy
suspicions he had about the weedy little man's motivations. Not all of them, but at least two very
minor concerns.

The tip earned this 'senior' about two pinches of the Sun's consideration. As easy as it could've been
found out had he just gone looking for it through the student body… the kid did bring it to him without needing to go through the effort when he was focused on something else. "If I spend a few hours here or there reading up on the subject... I suppose you might have something to work on with it?"

"Current debate for the spring production is either *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* or *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* if we can maybe get enough dancers to commit. So... we've done neither recently, and that means sixteenth century German court fashions or seventeenth century French court fashions." With a Gallic shrug, the younger man gave a backwards wave to the entire slowly emptying conference room to include everyone that volunteered their time to help his club out with basic busy work. Even if they had long since abandoned the room after getting their free if subpar coffee supplied in thanks. "We need several more hands to help with the design and creation as much as getting the inevitable mending taken care of with as little additional effort as we can get away with. You did just volunteer for it. Care for a bit more?"

...there were three or four introductory classes Oppliger couldn't rush him through, mostly due to the professors not wanting to hand out free passes out of their courses for an unknown student of dubious quality. Two of three he knew of, the last being still in negotiation with a recently returned instructor, were linchpins in advancing from introductory overviews for a taste of the subject matter to intermediate mathematical applications in various fields of study.

It was looking like he had to spend a semester taking them for progressing on his major as it was, while getting the extra credits outside of the mathematics courses for that minor's in psychology and everything else to qualify for a full degree filled in between the bottlenecks. He was familiar with most if not all his impending classes already from self-study either recently or in absent moments from years ago looking something up, meaning these next fifteen weeks would not be particularly mentally taxing enough for him.

Specialized, targeted help to become a better amateur tailor on one hand. Even less free time to do whatever he could possibly conceive to whittle away the time he had to wait out before he could go home again on the other.

...and costume design. He actually didn't mind the thought of spending some time exploring this subject as he would mind... say... dance. He didn't think he'd make a good ballerina himself.

Reaching up and pulling the young chameleon out of his hair, they were about to go outside and as hot as he ran internally the cold-blooded reptile would not appreciate the poor insulation available up there when they stepped out into a late summer-early autumn night, he allowed Leon to slide back into his shirt cuff to seek skin contact within before deciding.

The comical surprise on the younger man's face at the reveal of his pet was just... amusing.

"I cannot commit to anything more than a semester."

"Not with Oppliger behind you, obviously not." Dryly agreed the drama club member attempting to poach his limited free time, studying the older man thoughtfully. "Then again, beggars can't be choosers and all that. Besides, I'm not asking for seven nights a week. An afternoon or two every other, maybe."

"Very intent on this, aren't we?"

"I don't exactly have a long list of people lining up to help me with costume design, or makeup. Prop making and setting design, sure. Costumes, jewelry, and makeup... and making sure the actors look good in them? Not so much. You haven't exactly run me off yet or laughed in my face, so I'm
guessing you might be more interested than you're letting on."

Well, true enough.

Leon decided things had stalled way too long, tiny chameleon claws tugged on the fabric around his sleeve so the lizard could try finding what he needed himself. Appreciatively well aware sometimes he needed to get on with whatever himself or not, the hitman was a tiny bit leery of letting the Mist-Flame created creature to wander without at least a half-assed idea of where he was going.

Cupping a hand around that wrist to calm his pet for a few more minutes, he gave the kid a wry smirk that was maybe a bit toothy. "Perhaps. Schedule permitting."

The kid groaned theatrically, throwing both hands over his face. "Don't do that to me, man. With Oppliger 'managing' you, you're not going to have a permitting schedule."

"All I'm prepared to give until I know what else he's going to throw at me." Airily dismissed the hitman on his way past the kid, rolling out stiffened shoulders and snagging one last sub-par paper coffee cup to sip on the go. "Ciao, for now."

"That kind of sounds like a threat, Scarano!"

He had to laugh on his way out the door, because it really was.

The gunslinger wasn't wedded to the idea of pitching in with a school club run drama club, that was getting a bit uncomfortably similar to Renato's still hidden but possibly recognizable favor for the whole subject. However, the offer meant there was information to be had he had just been musing about. Owned by the drama club member, or at least easily sourced by him.

Either he would help the kid out, or he'd be pursuing that information some other way.

Middle of the night, when the kid was in class, stealing it from another of the drama club members, he wasn't particularly picky about the invasion of privacy if he got what he wanted in the end.
(Tuesday the 1st of September, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Grumbling a bit sourly, Tatiana slapped closed the hard cover text of medical terms Hawk picked up to stock Sonya's library with. Not hard, because that way was stupidly suicidal and as irked as she was she wasn't going to risk that, but still firmly on the table. "Flat feet. How the fuck did I end up with flat feet?"

Catching her sister's worried gaze on her, she simply huffed sourly and picked up a spoon to start eating her probably cold breakfast with.

"Don't worry, I'm just bitching. I thought it was just being on my feet for eight to ten hours running after dumb-shit patients or fetching this or that for whichever asshole forgot to stock their examination rooms with. Just... well. Wasn't expecting that to come out from visiting your bootmaker."

"...genetically?" Posed the blonde cautiously, because none of them really did like to reference where they were before Lisa built herself a family from a bunch of loose orphans. She then immediately took a bite of her yogurt before continuing, because it was still kind of awkward for them to try discussing their biological parents or initial lifestyles with each other even after so many years and the hard details being found out already. "Horatiu did say you had arches, just not much of them. Maybe they flattened? Or... however you're supposed to term it."

"Fallen. If you have arches before a point and end up with flat feet at another, it's called fallen arches. Well, if it is a case of fallen arches and not just flat feet... doesn't really change much." It all boiled down to the same result as it was, meaning she was probably going to nix mass produced footwear and just stick with her sister's cordwainer for the unbelievably comfortable personalized arch support. "Turns it from me not being weirdly unable to heal my own feet of simple recurring aches and pain into a legitimate problem I should've dealt with last year when it started."

Sonya kept an eye on her anyways, worried and a little unsure given that half pout half frown on her lips.

Yes, her baby sister had stalled like a brat about sharing her bootmaker with her. Making her wait the entire summer before giving in and giving her what she wanted. Then again, neither of them knew there was a legitimate reason the nurse needed specially crafted soles to support the now slight arches of her feet before Horatiu started clucking with concern over her casts.

Tatiana would be visiting the orthopedic wing of the hospital the moment she returned to Mafia Land, probably on her way to Moscow to finally release Avdotya from being a school nurse. An elderly and masterful bootmaker or not, Horatiu was not a medical professional and she should probably get his diagnosis confirmed independently by another.

Then again, he was an elderly man. Probably had seen it before and would again, so she wasn't remotely ready to discard the information out of hand because he wasn't a nurse or specialized doctor.

She knew a shit ton better than to do that. Just because you weren't official or accredited didn't mean you also had little to no idea what you were talking about. Although it made it easier to take the advice to heart if you had it.
Thankfully she was legally and fully adopted, unlike her foster siblings who had somewhat sketchy home lives before Lisa picked up the sisters and Sonya dragged their dork of a brother home with her one night. All of Tatiana's paperwork, including her baby and childhood medical records, were complete as required and could be used as references when checking out the blonde's suggestion for how she ended up with flat feet.

Worse came to worse, she could do a little digging in her own background history and pull out her dad's medical records to see if he had the same problem... if he had any records. Maybe her mom's... if her mother's name was recorded anywhere in connection with her father's or if she had any. From them, further back if there was a record to be had.

"Probably should make it a point to stretch out your feet before and after your shifts." Sonya suggested into the silence of a really early morning breakfast, glancing to the side when Alek perked up and got to his fluffy white paws to greet his brother.

The two canines promptly got into a play fight over whatever their little doggy minds insisted needed to be done every damn time they saw one another, which Shamal neatly stepped over on his groggy way to the table for his breakfast.

Entirely Mist-Flame assisted, that maneuver. That was way too smooth for a kid readjusting to keeping awake in the morning for attending school in another village-town next week, after a whole summer of lazily sleeping in and getting up only when he felt like it or someone was sent to wake him up.

Was Usov tending to his fellow little Mist, or was the Mirror Lady not yet in bed?

Either could be the culprit, or her snot of a nephew himself if he didn't feel like face-planting into the floor this morning.

The brat climbed up to sit on a chair and then practically tipped into Sonya's unresisting side, apparently settling in for a nap in his godmother's ribs instead of getting himself a plate of food to start chewing. Unlike practically every other time someone touched near her stomach, her baby sister ignored it.

"...can you keep up with ballet, or should you maybe abstain?" Inquired the other woman instead as a small trickle of the other children wandered into the dinning room after Shamal, Mingxia was probably the most awake and Larion seemed a second or two away from following the youngest Mist's example with his own mother's side. "With the flat feet and all..."

"You can be a dancer with flat feet, as a matter of fact the exercise and even basic stretches will keep my tendons from seizing up or the structure of my feet from deforming beyond comfortable limits." She should go back to mainly doing dance for exercise, if only because Fut Gar didn't have as much emphasis on flexible footwork that ballet did. While she'd dance more, that didn't also mean she had to stop her sparring practice. Just on the balance of things, keeping her feet fit now took precedence over keeping up her muscle tone. "It's just... blech, I'm getting old. At like, twenty-two."

Sonya gave her a completely incompressible look for that quip, instead of the half-expected confusion or the opportunistic taking of an oblique invitation to rib her about being two years younger deal. "You got to twenty-one, when if you really think about it there's an incredibly depressing number of people that never will. Nor will experience the trouble that comes with getting past the big two-zero age number."

"...that is depressing." Not particularly breakfast-topics either, if her sister was feeling that morbid. "Let's change the subject. Bambino's medical check is done for his school year... what else do you
need for him?"

"Dental records, I think… so a checkup and maybe a cleaning."

Shamal hurriedly got upright as fast as his tired body let him just to interject and shake his head. "I got it done last winter, mamma!"

"The thing about medical and dental checks, kid, they need to be done at least biyearly until you're much taller." Ignoring her brat's low whine at the news, Sonya spooned up a bit more of her nearly-gone oatmeal. "You want to go off and screw around with your boyfriend before you have to leave Italy, Tats?"

"Would've been a good suggestion… if you had made it yesterday. Or maybe a week before that." She retorted dryly, digging out another tasty bite of omelet with her fork. "But it's now September, I've got to go relieve Avdotya from her school nurse duties and settle in on what mom wants done medically come the start of that school year."

Sonya considered things, rather specifically eyeing her in a contemplative way. "You did catch Mingxia and old man Yaozu up with their vaccinations, right?"

"Oh yeah, that's why there's a bill for four hundred euros on Maximillian's desk. That was vaccinations for everyone that needed them and some basic arthritis medication the old master may or may not be taking. Paperwork is with Ruslana, as your 'head of household' substitute."

Her sister frowned thoughtfully, glancing over to the small table positioned under one of the dining hall's windows where the Chinese pair usually took their meals to eat. "Think either have been to a dentist at all in their lifetimes?"

Tatiana laughed weakly, very slowly sliding her breakfast dishes to the middle of the table before hurriedly getting to her feet. "Well what do you know, look at the time! I really need to get on packing and whatnot before my flight back home!"

"Hey, wait. That doesn't answer-"

"Bye, sis. Bye, bambino!"

She wasn't going to lie, she flat out bolted out of there.

Just getting the elderly old asshole to admit his hands were deformed and aching from his lifetime of learning the most efficient ways to break someone's face with them had been like pulling teeth. She was damn certain the medication she got him was going to waste, but just on the off-chance he might want to ease the pain she ordered them anyways.

Getting Mr. Old and Set In His Ways to visit a medical practitioner to see about his teeth… the girl would be easier. Tasty Muscle's little sister was a sweet little thing… mainly.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 1st of September, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"…Lovely Bossy Dragoness…?" Brandishing an old employment contract she inquired if she could look over to explain most of why he was seeking her out, Cesare carefully slid into the secondary office next to Maximillian's to check if she would allow a tiny personal favor or not. "Can I have a moment?"
This office had most of what paperwork had been started with the maids and property related
documents that might be needed to prove ownership, and with the end of summer looming things
needed to be shifted to account for two of the maids returning to their education with a tidy paycheck
under their belts. They'd all return next summer, theoretically, but until then they simply needed
additional hands as the more criminally inclined of their number returned their attentions to their
various fields and left the children with attached parents to their own devices.

The lovely Ruslana had more to do with this office, but frankly it was entirely on their boss' behalf.
Who was checking everything over as closely as possible to be sure everything could stand a strident
inspection or three by the local cops.

Sonya eyed him consideringly for a long moment… but then again, she always was as hesitant
when he sought her out until she understood what aim a Mafioso assassin had for her. "Sure. About
what?"

Handing over the old paperwork so she and her Lackey could finally finish filling out the castle staff
from suitably informed footmen and/or a butler to help cushion things, he slid himself onto the
abandoned crate the glass shaded lamp had been shipped here in that probably wasn't there with the
intent of being used as a seat. "Ah… I'm aware Natalina didn't make the best impression on your
Lackey."

"Whatever he's planning with the Mirror Lady… is up to them." Cut off the step-away-from-
a-famiglia boss, with a negative shake of her head as he glanced over his very old employment
paperwork to get a general gist of how to structure a Mafia-related employee contract for her own
future use. "If you can reach this 'Natalina' first, you can do whatever you want… but the moment
she reaches the comune's limits, Anna's going to know."

He thought about it.

Natalina was not his favorite of their little old gang of not-friends. To say the least of the whole
situation.

Anna was a delightful young lady that suffered his questioning of her abilities and pet rather
tolerantly while he tried to catch up with all the Dying Will Flame user tips and insider tricks to living
with them now he technically was. He had a very charmingly expansive room to himself on the
fourth floor and everything, and as far as a fallback position was… he was hard pressed to think up a
better one than this.

Renato had never been particularly verbose about his preferences or what effects his Flames caused
him, mainly from not being entirely sure himself until he got more and more involved with others of
his kind. Cesare didn't know if Anna would grow annoyed or angry at any outside interference in
whatever she intended to do on the distant Bjørn's behalf, and if that information line would dry up
in response to any attempt on his end to circumvent her.

He hadn't met the Lackey yet, he really didn't have any measure over what he would appreciate or
not. Unfortunate, when his reaction or views of him might very well shift the Mafioso's reception in
Renato's godson's home.

The hitman hadn't brought him here on a whim, however necessary it was that Sonya have the
assistance of a professional chef to help her through her beginner's attempts at cooking moderately
complex dishes. The unspoken implication of 'keep an eye on them for me' that bringing the assassin
to his lady thief and godson underlined the whole situation with, especially before attempting
something he very well hadn't survived completing on his own, made Cesare rather unwilling to lose
any of the goodwill he had earned himself or otherwise so far from the residents.
"Being I am to attend to Natalina before her meeting with you, can I do anything?" Questioned the Mafioso curiously, deciding to start from the beginning from his lack of experience for what leeway he might just have in this kind of situation. "Well, before you say the obvious, I mean would doing anything change the opinion of any here to something I might not wish to risk?"

Sonya gifted him with an impressively flat look, pausing in jolting down her observations and ideas reading over his almost decade-old contract with a syndicate that had run a restaurant had given her. 

"Are you not an adult?"

"Is there a cultural difference between my helping an old associate and what it would mean to me than what it would mean for you and the others here?" He countered without taking offense, rotating a wrist in the air between them to include all the Flame users that would look to her for leadership as well as all those non-Flame users like him she paid a wage to. "I believe I know what Natalina believes she is walking into from what little I have gotten from Anna's off-handed mention... and it is not what she's walking into."

She puzzled over that for a moment, very considerately. "Honestly, I'd probably think less of you for not doing so if you could avoid anything too galling to deal with. Obviously I am not Anna, or Usov, or even Peter and Verde... or Adrik. Or Shamal. Asking them would help you more than finding my opinion... although Anna wouldn't have said anything to you if she didn't intend for you to make use of it. If you really need it, I respect prior commitments being honored before more recent ones as long as it's minor enough to be warnings or preventative in nature and not... stabbing me in the back."

Hmm... not particularly helpful but it did at least clarify he would not be barred, or anything similar if not so final, should he choose to help someone he knew longer than he had known her for.

"I've never noticed Mists getting irritated at being thwarted by anything... but you realize, whatever you do, it likely will not prevent whatever Anna is planning from happening in the end." Further clarified the Storm-Cloud without much care to her tone, checking over what she had written up before handing back his very old employment contract he kept for... later references and/or blackmail. "I'm afraid, as a whole type generally, we are some very stubborn little fucks when we have ideas."

Cesare barked a surprise laugh, endlessly amused by the admission. As if the rest of them weren't exactly the same without the magical rainbow fire-abilities. "I have no problem with that, Lovely Bossy Dragoness. I just wish to nip in the bud the exact same assumptions I arrived here with, and the inevitable reaction she intends to go with instead of what she really should."

"...you do realize that, at least to Anna, doing whatever Bjorn asked of her and you warning your fellow may not actually be mutually exclusive to her. Right?" Checked the woman after a moment of internal puzzlement, whether it was over his presence or something she just thought of was debatable. "Her mentioning it to you is very good in terms of how highly she values your company, or just her wishing to fuck with someone's head with your unwilling help..."

"Curious. Would you allow that?"

"Entirely possible."

...he had to admit, he wouldn't have thought of that himself. He would've assumed the young Mirror Lady would object to his plans, not actively assist him while twisting it into what she intended.

Natalina was obviously operating under the assumption this was another ex-lover she had to stake territory out in front of as Sinclair's first ex, to chase her off from trying to use the hitman's reputation
or related social weight to further her own. Someone who had something of their now deceased fellow's to pry out of her grips for its own protection, more than likely.

A non-murderous, combat-shy, dainty, foreigner. Two out of four would be very correct... but those initial assumption about what kind of a person picked to be and stay a thief...

The whole reality of being Renato's fellow godparent was obviously far from her mind, and the assassin hadn't exactly missed how wary the brat was even as he tried to pump him for more stories of his godfather when he could muster up the will to think of the situation.

He had entirely assumed he was just going to meet a new if finally somewhat serious 'flame' upon his arrival, nothing the asshole even breathed at so much as suggested a painfully young sore spot to protect until well inside the castle's walls. At least he was informed before meeting the child, and the whole arrangement Anna let slipped to him suggested Shamal should be meeting Natalina exactly at the same time as the boss lady before him would.

Which... even with his ambiguous feelings about one fourth of the remaining survivors of their group, Cesare was of two minds about. A warning would not be misplaced, just so she could risk what she would fully informed, but...

...well, she was kind of a bitch.

That had never really been a problem for any of them, to be completely honest. Cesare could be an asshole, Renato pretty much had been nothing but an asshole, Dante and Lando weren't all that different either even if one of those two was more mild-manner on average and the other was definitely less so.

He had his reasons for grudge holding, no matter how exasperating Renato had found him throwing his previously hormone-fueled blindness into his face occasionally. It had been a mistake in the end, the hitman was an asshole, the assassin was perfectly entitled to hold it against him and her both in lieu of any forthcoming apologies if she'd rather.

However, Natalina went to Mafia Land with her lover for a very specific reason and remained afterwards once they drifted apart for the same one. She hadn't returned to Italia for at least half a decade now, and while it was fitting it was Renato's death she'd return for... she was risking a significant amount of backlash for taking care of a former flame's last will and testament.

"I believe I have my answer, Lovely Bossy Dragoness." He could give a tiny bit of help, it was really her due for being halfway decent to expectations. It was highly unlikely if he did offend the Mirror Lady or distant Björn in Mafia Land that they would exceed what their leader and main boss figure had decided upon as her worst case. "My thanks."

She gave him an odd look for his words, skeptical and not particularly interested but forcing it anyways since he seemed to have a reason to seek her opinion on it all in the first place, then waved a hand to the still open door. "Okay then. When you get back to the kitchen, send Ruslana back here? I need to give her advice about how to deal with the probable butler type we're going to test out while I'm gone."

Cesare, half-raised out of the lone chair positioned across from the one she was seated upon, sank back down slowly. "Would you like my attendance through the first few weeks?"

"...if you could. I'd delay, at least a few days to meet this one, but I literally need to cram fifteen heists in before the end of the year. Preferably more. And there's no guarantee they'll be in a row like I prefer... Adrik has orders, as well as both Usov and Anna, but Ruslana's going to be the one to
be the 'face' of the household without me so she's the one that has to do most of this.

Well, there will be more than enough support for the dear motherly lady. Just… only one suitable criminal who was already somewhat lamed that would be watching for major issues. "I'll insure Adrik has contact information for me, even if it won't be direct lines. Just in case."

Grey eyes flicked back up to him and he found himself the subject of the Lovely Bossy Dragoness’ inspection yet again. Not a particularly rare occurrence, however politely she had made room for him to occupy in her personal space on the strength of a mutual associate's recommendation to flesh out her household, but it rarely felt as weighty as this one glance did in this moment. "Appreciated. If you're at hand, then I won't need to ask Tyr for pricing a murder or two."

There was a beat of somewhat off silence.

"If you would like to outsource a few things, I would not mind picking it up if you feel so inclined." Cesare offered obligingly, if not entirely sure it would address whatever was being stressed or tested between them. "However, I do not remotely mind being overlooked in Tyr the Sword Emperor's favor if he gets first claim due to being known to you longer."

Very few assassins would, if he was going to be as honest as her. Well, very few Italian assassins would object to being overlooked by Vongola's head assassin.

…very few southern Italians, given her issue with the Todd Famiglia and the northern assassins in general and how disinclined they were likely to be if she asked them for an assassination.

Actually that would mean that a significant number of assassins would take offense. Hmm, very curious.

Not really his problem, until and unless they tried to mess with him rather than keep trying to intimidate her.

Eventually, the Lovely Bossy Dragoness blinked. "Right. I appreciate the consideration."

There was an almost overpowering itch to linger and force some more wooden polite conversation, because the woman was truly awful at it to the point of it being utterly hilarious, but Cesare was still trying to ensure he was well thought of to outlast his occasional side-jaunts into being murderous for a paycheck very much elsewhere.

He wasn't entirely of the opinion being a kept assassin would be a bad idea, it was practically an assassin's version of life insurance and job security. However he wasn't really looking for a master, or mistress in this case, who would then be able to dictate who and when to go after.

Or at least, he wasn't looking for one at this moment.

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(Wednesday the 2nd of September, 1970. Acquasola Park, Genoa, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

Glar

"That is the point, I believe." Mused the assassin conversationally, as if she had asked a question his opinion was required on, looking as content to just meander around a stupid child's playground with them as he'd be in an adequately stocked kitchen and left to experiment. "Almost there..."
"We were 'almost there' when we were on the other side of the damn, fucking path!" She could even point to where they had been when he made that claim before less than twenty meters away, because they and it was just circling the same section of park that had only so much in it.

Given it was directly inside of Genoa's city limits, and was mainly a children's playground, the fact it had a looping path that just circled the playground equipment was entirely understandable. The issue the hitwoman had with the whole point was that Cesare was just circling the entire park aimlessly on his way to the 'agreed' upon meeting place for this Bazanova girl and whoever 'Tringali' was supposed to be.

"Well, we'd be closer than 'almost there' had you not pissed off the Lackey." Tossed the Mafioso over a shoulder dryly, still wandering ahead without needing to look back to see if Lando was good to continue or not because he wasn't moving with any remotely acceptable speed in his steps. "Frankly, even knowing I'd put myself in the way warning you about it... it is kind of actually infuriating you and I entirely enjoy that more than it annoys me. So onward and more, then. Until it gets boring to her, I guess."

"Wait, she...?" Dante gave her a fairly exasperated look, coming to a full stop and forcing their long-suffering and mainly now usually forgotten final member of their little group to stop as well before turning to the only one who knew where they were supposed to go. "...well fuck. Why the hell didn't you tell us?"

"I was politely asked not to."

"May I politely point out neither me nor Lando has anything to do with whatever Natalina fucked up?" Tried the Mafia School Instructor rather uselessly to the sky as their peg-legged Mafioso opened his mouth to bite something sarcastic out... only for the two of them to suddenly disappear as if they never stood there.

She knew they were either too far away or completely gone, because Lando would've had the same exact reaction as her. Which was summed up as, "What. The Fuck."

"Surprise." Cesare drawled out sarcastically, finally turning around to look at her since they got here. "That Lackey you pissed off has his patron's entire range of authority to get back at you for slighting him. Of them, and as long as the boss doesn't know, more than most have nothing to do with that ever so special island you adore working for that you blew the rest of us off for... and so they don't give a fig leaf for what consequences you might suffer because of it."

...add it to the pile of 'this shit makes little/no sense' then. There was a mound of it, growing bit by bit, in the back of her mind. Somehow one Lackey had the connections to warp reality on her, sure. "Cesare. Explain."

"I just did." Scoffed the man pointedly, obviously aware that was not what she was asking but entirely too willing to ignore that just to needle her a tiny bit more.

Obviously, he wanted her to ask.

Not giving him the satisfaction of it, Natalina inspected their surroundings instead once she deemed him a poor source of information.

There was... not a whole lot to see. The playground equipment was abandoned, the path they had been 'following' was equally... empty...

She glanced to the handful of trees turning this stretch of urban city into a half-assed park
There was no animal life either.

Even in the middle of the day, a public location like a park would've been filled with people. The retired, unemployed, off-shift, and any children taking advantage of the last few days of full summer before they were crammed back into school for the fall. Even then, there were dog walkers that would've adored the simple circular path to walk their animals and whatever bare woodland creatures that could make do with such limited greenery.

Apparently that was at any other time than right this second, because aside herself and the assassin there was no one. Again, not even Lando nor Dante. Two of whom she knew had been here up to barely a minute ago.

"…not in Genoa anymore, are we?" As the last word left her lips, something across her vision shattered like so much glass. Movement and the noise of life assaulted her all at once as if to make up for it's absence before, causing the hitwoman to flinch from being almost overwhelmed trying to track everything all at once.

"Manners cost you nothing…" A rather younger voice with an accent she couldn't immediately place spoke behind her, a brunette girl with what looked to be an ornate silver hand mirror held out in front of her flicked disturbingly gleaming blue eyes up to her as she whirled around. "…but, the lack might just cost you everything. Do keep it in mind, please."

An utterly wicked smile crossed her lips, and the much younger girl shattered into nothingness just like the strange view of a lifeless park had before Natalina could gather herself enough to ask if she had been the one leading them around.

"Pity." Cesare volunteered pleasantly, sauntering off to where Lando had been seated on a bench next to some slightly built blonde woman with crossed arms idly watching them. "I had hoped that would take longer."

The grey-eyed blonde lifted a wrist and pointedly glanced at the watch ticking away on it without moving a muscle otherwise. "Frankly, I'm already bored of watching you all circle around uselessly to try finding me and I wasn't even hiding."

"Ah… but Lovely Bossy Dragoness, the Mirror Lady asked ever so nicely to get her crack in first." Glancing first at then immediately dismissing Dante's not particularly expectant expression for the strange nickname he had for the newcomer as apparently not important, Cesare glanced down to their group's last remaining hitman. "Lando, have you met Sonya Bazanova? She and Renato were… were you two dating or just-"

"Dating. There wasn't actually a whole lot of time we could put towards anything further."

Interrupted the thief pointedly, when it didn't change the assassin's mildly polite look of attention she huffed a sigh and reluctantly continued as she tucked her arm back to that crossed position. "Look, that whole… whatever he went to do that last time? He had been on-and-off hunting and avoiding it by turns for the last year and some. He used visiting me in Russia as a way to stump them a couple times, then more recently used the dockside near me to do the exact same thing. When I said there hadn't been enough time, I mean generally we were a bit harder pressed getting… other responsibilities settled first as securely as possible."

"…entirely understandable." Allowed Dante conversationally, giving the skeptical look he was shot an affable smile in return. "He had to register that 'other responsibilities' for his slot in my institution somehow, I got the whole story."
"Well. Good. Let me know when to send him in."

"Excuse me." Natalina butted in before Cesare could continue with his light interrogation of the other woman he was apparently friendly with, maybe a little pointedly but she really hated being the last to know something. "But I believe you, Miss Bazanova, were supposed to be bringing along-"

"Mamma! There's a gelato stand just... two..." A child came to a screeching halt, forcing the two canines cheerfully chasing him around to do some fancy paw-work to avoid crashing into his back. ". . . oh, they're aware."

"Unfortunately." Agreed the woman the child had been addressing while the mostly white dog got into a tussle with the slightly bigger tri-colored pup. "Perhaps Cesare would like to go with you and get a sample? Maybe then he can use it to continue trying to convince Ruslana that gelato is superior to 'any old ice cream'."

"I don't know, Cesare... I've had Russian ice cream. It's really good..."

The only one of them that acquired his 'side-specialty' without major loss of limbs or because he had no other choice scoffed, obviously faking offense rather transparently at such a claim. "Lies. Lies and slander, I shall not stand for this!"

"Then take a seat, and I'll go get gelato myself." Advised the brunette boy cheerfully, entirely unbothered by the exasperated look he was gifted by the chef, turning back to his claimed 'mamma' and holding out his hands.

She merely raised an eyebrow back at him.

"Well, I could use some of my pocket money mamma... but I really want to save it for more bugs for Luigi." When the supposed thief sighed again, he beamed brightly back at her. "And that way you can have your 'adult' conversations safely out of my ear-shot!"

"And you'll still listen in anyways. I'm not that thick, brat." Unfolding her arms and opening the wallet apparently held in expectation for something very much like this almost nonsensical conversation, Bazanova dug out a few bills and handed them to him.

Once the child ran off, causing one dog to drop the playfight to belatedly dash after him and the other left behind scrambling to keep up, the woman eyed what was left in the strangely familiar wallet... then tossed it at Natalina's face.

. . . motherfucker, this was her wallet!

"My Lackey is not yours. You ever threaten him again, and I'll ensure to do exactly what you threatened him with on you." Bitchily advised the blonde flatly as her child ran off to spend Natalina's money, pinning her with a flat glare on top of everything. "I don't care if you're Renato's one true love, his stalker ex-girlfriend, or the next coming of your messiah. You will either be polite, or not bother my people."

"Ah... Lovely Bossy Dragoness... that is Renato's ex." Chortled Cesare, grinning a fit that threatened to crack his head clean off. "Natalina."

Flat grey eyes flicked from her to him, then back again, before she returned to idly watching the movement on the playground as various children screamed and clambered all over it. "...I still don't care. May I now know why one of Renato's associates I didn't know personally demanded my presence along with our godchild's? If there's anyone left who had issues with the asshole he couldn't get all at once, Shamal would be their next target... if they knew he existed."
Swallowing the entirely sour realization that her ex had apparently hid something like 'I have a godson' from her for several years, if not longer given how unsurprised two of their number was at that bit of news, the hitwoman scoffed bitterly. "Really. Then you just let him run off on his own for a little treat?"

A blonde eyebrow rose up slowly. "Did you not just have an object lesson in 'Mists can fuck your understanding of reality over'? Shamal will probably be fine against any purely human attackers. It'll be the not so normal ones he'd have issue with, but thankfully most of those around here are all Superbis and I've warned Mrs. Silvery-White we were doing this in her town. Besides... it's not like the Mirror Lady has left yet."

"Ah." Interjected Dante much less hastily than he had been intending to, when woman had not been remotely fussed about talking over his attempt to interrupt. "So... the conversation will be secured?"

"There's you, me, and it technically has to do with the brat. Likely, we have a Vindice Officer overseeing too." Agreed the woman, ridiculously. "I don't think there's much to oversee, but just so it's out there."

"Right... so!" Turning to her, slightly wincing even if they all caught him doing it, and then hastily turning to the still so-far silent Lando... the Mafia School Instructor tried for a grin and failed miserably. "Since I have the opportunity, I'd like to inject several things. First and foremost, there were a couple things Renato was beholden to for Omertà that we're not. Secondly-"

"Is that why he basically adopted a brat I told him to throw in the nearest orphanage?" Natalina interrupted shortly, finally putting the clues together to come up with a possible series of events for how and why her ex hadn't ever brought the subject up to her. "...yes." Confirmed the one she really didn't want an answer from, neither looking nor seeming very impressed with her probably too hastily spat out question. "Shamal was three-and-a-half when Renato fetched him out of a shitty situation after the death of the kid's father and his contact. By Vindice Laws, he then had to pass on several restrictions that a toddler probably couldn't entirely understand as the one in the know that found another not. Had he tried your suggestion, he'd end up complicit if Shamal ever ended up in government or military work after his years in a civilian orphanage. Furthermore, D'Attilio, you are also beholden to those laws."

"How often does that happen?"

"More than you'd think. Very recently, in America. Verde and Adrik, if you must know. Ask them about it sometime."

"I'm not one of those Instructors, so I never looked into it." Dante offered if that had any impact on the topic, although bizarrely it seemed his statement did. He earned a hitch of Bazanova's shoulder in response and took it to mean something reassuring, not dismissive as she found it. "Although I'll be sure to stress that to the other non-Flame-able students once I double check, just to be on the safe side. Secondly, for the rest of you, Renato's ability to heal actually isn't the most 'outlandish' of abilities Dying Will Flame users have."

"Better than 'fucking over our understanding of reality'?" Lando stressed carefully, and uncharacteristically rather warier than harshly as he normally questioned things he found nonsensical.

Then again, he was seating directly next to the thief-woman. If the foreigner was armed, and with his left leg missing from the knee down, the lamed Mafioso would be unable to avoid anything too threatening before the rest of them could interfere.
A cringingly high-pitched *screech* of tortured metal drew attention to the curved scrollwork of wrought iron that made up the ‘arm’ of the bench the two were sitting on, and Bazanova *pulling cold wrought iron straight bare-handed*. She then very pointedly and *slowly bent it back* in an approximation of the loops it had been in before, but it was still tilted awkwardly and rather noticeable in it.

…alright. That was a *lot* more intimidating in person than just hearing about the possibility of it. That wasn’t… that *couldn’t* be real. Metal didn’t *behave* like that. Her hand should be *bleeding*, or bruised, or *something*!

The woman then stood upright with her completely undamaged hand, leisurely like and with enough deliberation to make it clear she was doing it slowly on purpose to not startle any disadvantageous reactions, giving a very pointed glance to Cesare before turning to her bench mate first. *"I would like to speak with you later. I'm not sure if replacing a missing limb is within the bound of the experiment my sister is intending to do, by what little I know of it the outer limitation was 'damaged organs'. But. There is a possible medical experiment pending that might just be able to use your… injury, to study replacing damage human physiology with cloned replacements. If you would like to see if that might assist your situation, or just volunteer your time for free high-quality medical care, I can put you in contact with the proposal's originator or the hospital considering it."*

Lando scowled, because he *hated* his missing leg for not being there anymore and equally loathed anyone that brought it up even obliquely. Although the bait, and it *had to be bait*, kept his mouth shut as he absorbed the offer.

Then Bazanova turned to her, and to be honest Natalina was resigned to having made a shitty impression on the other woman and somehow needing to salvage it all just to get this whole death benefits paperwork settled without too much blood being drawn. *"I'm just going to forget you said anything."

*"What? …why?"

Bazanova eyed her skeptically before dropping her folded arms and walking off. *"Because, I think you were manipulated into giving a poor first impression. While I have no issue judging you from first impressions… I apparently have reservations when my own people intend to screw you around to make a poor one on me. We'll try this again in fifteen minutes, after I ensure Shamal's not feeding frozen yogurt to the dogs."*

Cesare only waited just long enough for the woman to get mostly out of earshot, then turned to her with an *entirely* too big shit-eating grin. *"Apparently, Renato really likes MILFs."*

*"…a what?"* Dante asked before she could, with a pinched expression and looking very stuffy as he picked up on the undertone the chef intended to piss her off with.

*A mamma I'd love to fuck.* He sniggered, stretching out his spine just apparently to occupy himself with instead of acknowledging her disgusted glare a few seconds more.

*"Are you ignoring the fact she could very well snap your spine with her thighs if you annoyed her a bit too much?"* Lando shot back, because their school teacher Mafioso certainly would not be doing so judging by the flat look on his face now, giving the awkwardly bent arm to the park bench for emphasis. *"Pretty or not, not touching that."

*"Hmm… well, you always were just a hair-"*

*"Don't got there."* Natalina snapped harshly when their lamed fellow's features darkened two degrees
basically begging the other Mafioso to say it, raking a hand through her hair to scratch at the back of her head through the heavy curls. "I don't want to be peeling him off you when he tries to rip your face off for it."

"Well-"

"So! I lost an argument with an eight-year-old kid not too long ago?" Dante desperately interrupted before the chef could continue, a weak smile on his face as he braced himself for the inevitable ribbing he had just opened himself up to in the aims of giving her more thinking time.

Unfortunately, Natalina didn't really want the time. It'd mean she had to contemplate exactly how far she and Renato had drifted apart, for him to completely hide so much as a hint he took on a child to raise. With another woman.

A non-Italian, non-Catholic woman given that quip of 'your messiah'. A God-less Russian, just what any God-fearing young Italian needed in their life. He was probably never going to stop being ribbed about his 'mother' for his entire life…

Cesare probably already cribbed any possible opening to mind Renato's ankle biter in whatever area 'momma' was deficient in a young boy's home life, given the discussion of some random other foreigner and his attempts to convince her otherwise about a food item. Meaning he had been slid into 'mom's' life somehow and would provide the little personal touches and bits of information they had all been denied. Dante had his later childhood from the sounds of it, being a Mafia School Instructor he'd see about any young Italian's basic groundings in most every subject. Which had been also simply accepted as a matter of fact on the mere mention.

Leaving later in life up for grabs between her and Lando, and apparently 'momma' was going to give her one free pass due to her own people fucking around with her head. Had he not been killed, Renato probably would've sounded them both out and made the decision on 'just in case' himself… but…

…better leave it for the cripple. Frankly, she wasn't much for kids or teaching others. She knew why the hitman had done it all, they really had to learn all the shit the hard way even when asking others about certain issues… but insofar as learning better went experience in screwing it up and death were pretty damn good teachers in the first place. Those brats would either learn better or die, and frankly she couldn't muster up any motivation to try instructing them all differently when she was never given that help and she made it through mostly intact.

She hadn't thought Renato was much for either as well… it didn't really seem very him. Cesare and Dante basically undercut that suspicion though, for one as good as this thief might very well be there was no way she could alter the hitman's paperwork filed with the island without getting caught at it and for another if they had known of the brat's mere existence before when Renato had still been alive…

Feeling bizarrely chilled to the core in a hazily warm late summer afternoon near the seaside, the hitwoman blew out a completely tired sigh and pried her fingernails from the black leather folder she had been tasked with discharging to the right people then bringing back with her. "Cesare, where's the best place around here to take a kid for whatever he needs to eat a day while we all talk?"

There was a judgmental sniff, although thankfully it seemed it was more for the quality of fare around here than aimed at her yet again. "If we are speaking of only the best… a little place far up the mountains. La Brinca. More locally? I could sniff something out quickly… or we could tour the many street vendors for special treats and keep on the move until we find a suitable location for the paperwork you are still clutching like a lifeline."
Except, one of them couldn't do a meandering walk for kilometers just trying to find something suitable. Possibly two of them, depending on how exercised the kid was with a stable home under the blonde woman.

"Or," Dante offered in his 'professional insider' tone he could do so well when often hoodwinking the gullible into believing him wholesale, "a bar. Sonya will actually find that more 'professional' if you want to keep the undertone as 'business orientated' and not... 'trying to horn in on your personal life' kind of situation."

Under Natalina's flat stare, and Cesare's utterly skeptical one, he simply lifted both shoulders.

"According to Renato, a bar was exactly where she took him to for a 'private discussion' about how to move through Russia's variant of street life. She claimed most of Russia's underworld networked in them, well... them or nightclubs."

"...right. That's not how Italians do business." She informed him flatly. "Besides, we can't take a fucking kid into a bar around here. He doesn't even look anything approaching ten yet."

"Natalina... Shamal's a Mist. His appearance is entirely subjective to what he wants to give as an impression." He reminded her back pointedly, confirming a few facts that had only been hinted at.

She glared back, then shifted focus to the chef. "No bars."

"...how about a restaurant with an open bar?" Offered the assassin thoughtfully, contemplating something hopefully more useful than 'wander around aimlessly'. "Best of both worlds."

"A bar open near noon? That's not-"

"The Genovese." Lando brusquely interjected before the standing Mafiosi could continue bickering about whether to find something with an open bar in it or not. "We always go when we come here, and I'm not waiting around for you fuckers to get hungry again just to go this time. Either we go now, or I'm apparently going to sound out Bazanova about her 'medical experiment' shit later and the rest of you can fuck right off."

"Fine." Natalina snapped irritably, fed up with both the topic and the idea some strange woman Renato hadn't even bothered to introduce her to would be invited along to a semi-established tradition she didn't feel like sharing at all with outsiders. Apparently she was alone in that feeling, both Cesare and Dante seemed perfectly fine with the suggestion. "Get us a reservation, Dante. And you, Cesare, can sell it to the damn thief."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 2nd of September, 1970 continued. Il Genovese, Genoa, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"...I can almost guarantee you, brat, you do not need a bullet press." Sonya informed Shamal blandly, idly pushing the pretty awesome creamy walnut sauce covered whatever around her plate because Italians ate way too much per meal even for her higher than baseline normal metabolic rate. "Besides which, while I can understand taking his suits... you also don't need his damn couch. I have no idea where you'll even fit that in your room."

The kid shot her an exasperated look, nonverbally indicating that the items were less important to him than who previously owed it all... and he was being a bit of a selfish snot about it all. While she had no issue with him being selfish, firstly she fucking was too so... whatever, when it came to
things that were dangerous in unskilled hands…

Biting her lip against telling him the hitman in question had likely known of his things being divvied out once he was reported dead and probably shoved everything he wanted to keep past his 'death' in the storage locker she now had the key for, she turned to the peg-legged 'Lando'. "For fuck's sake, take the damn press before he throws a fit and I'll find somewhere for that stupid couch. I don't think gunpowder goes off, but I'd rather not store that for eight years and risk it blowing up from static electricity sparks or something…"

The Mafioso eyed her back skeptically but glanced to the apparent 'Natalina' to have that sorted for his 'half' of whatever household goods he had to split with a seven-year-old. Cesare, two bottles of wine in and already giggly with it, muffled his chuckles into a rather nice suit covered elbow she wasn't really used to seeing him dressed up in.

Halfway into inspecting all the paperwork before anyone remotely tried to sign it, due to Mafia Land finding it fucking hilarious to sneak little clauses like 'we will own the soul of the signee if this statement is not caught and inked out' and other more damaging quips for the idiots that didn't read them through stridently enough, Dante flatly ignored them all as he robotically ate and scrutinized fine print at the same time. Without getting the pesto sauce all over himself or the snow-white paper, impressively enough.

She had two general questions for one of the two new people she had been introduced to today, aside how really indifferent Lando was to needing to split a fellow's personal items with a godson of said fellow. The other was… was he still a Mafioso with a leg half-missing?

It was kind of… really rude, but she couldn't stop wondering.

At least, it was a better thing to wonder about aside how the hell Renato had put up with this other woman's whole… everything.

Sonya was kind of epically failing at not holding her minions' grudges against her, even knowing full well that had probably been the point of them doing it all in the first place. The woman was just… kind of an aggressive cold fish personality-wise and didn't seem to want to show her anything else.

Maybe it was just her or the subject matter… but Natalina was either by turns too brusquely business-like or completely indifferent to everything going on. More like Pavuchky than most other women she had bothered taking a measure to, just a watching hunter not particularly moved nor understanding of what was happening before her eyes.

It made her wonder if she was anything like how Natalina came off to her, at least in Renato's opinion.

No, Sonya wasn't particularly outgoing in social situations. About a quarter of the time they didn't really make much sense to her, so she'd rather watch and listen instead of sticking her foot in her mouth until they did. Perhaps then she was a little too hesitant, but that couldn't make her a 'dead-fish'… right?

She interacted with others… some of the time. More if it was someone she at least knew of, than unknowns trying to include her.

…so, yeah. She might be another 'dead-fish'.

Shit.

"and his pictures!"
"Renato doesn't have any pictures in his flat." Sonya absently reminded Shamal, still more wondering if she showed any kind of human personality when irked or upset enough. Probably not, unless she was pissed off or angry. "He has three paintings on his walls, either of mountains or forest in some mix I forget."

Dante snapped his head up, blinking a few times as he focused on her instead of the mostly done paperwork in something quite like horror. "He still has those?"

Given Cesare then promptly laughed his ass right off his chair, she kind of got the idea there was an insider joke at his expense finally being pulled. "…yes? They were there the last time the brat and I visited his place."

"Dante sold them, a hundred thousand lira per, trying to save up enough for hic-

"Shut up, Cesare." Snarled the usually mild Mafioso dangerously, looking torn between burying his face in his hands and some sappy looking smirk. The cross of exasperated, embarrassed, and fond turned out to look rather constipated on him.

"He painted them, too!" Chortled the definitely tipsy and still hiccupping assassin, sounding hysterically amused at practically everything from his position on the floor beside Shamal. "Claimed they were made by some nearly unknown, made up artist from two-three hundred years ago… and they were just crappy landscapes he learned to paint on some free weekend workshop… ha!"

Glancing at Lando to figure out what was so damn amusing to the group netted her rolled eyes and a half-smirk, and Natalina looked merely bored, so Sonya tentatively assumed whatever it was Dante had been hustling to afford was what should be so hilarious.

…however, no one was speaking of what it was all for.

The chef on the floor was smoothly pulling himself upright in spite of all the wine he had downed, just weaving back and forth a little as he tried to control his case of twitching diaphragm issues. Dante ducked his head and furiously went back… to rapidly reading fine print to find any clauses they wouldn't want to sign on before they signed off on the paperwork and left it up to Natalina to take it all back to Mafia Land.

Sonya managed to exchange a faintly lost look with Shamal before something else was said, so there was that.

"So… guess I'll take at least one of the paintings. The kid can have the other two." Lando concluded smugly, and a bit gleefully at his fellow's expense due to the fact he couldn't control the red flush creeping up his neck and burning the tips of both ears.

The brat shot her a pointed look, and she sighed. "Fine, whatever. We'll hang them up in-

"Ooh, can I have one for the dining room?" Inquired Cesare politely with a shark's grin, turning to the child when Sonya just flatly stared back at him. "Please…?"

"No! I'm terribly sorry for what I told Larion while I was drunk off my ass," half-lunging across the table to put himself directly in front of the young Mist without letting the assassin make faces and possibly influence the child behind his back, Dante tried for a ingratiating smile while flushed with embarrassment and slightly panicked, "I was drunk, not thinking straight, and let my mouth run without thought. Please, please don't let him do that."

Shamal gave him a pointedly disappointed look, then turned to their chef with a bright smirk. "Sure, Cesare!"
Dante groaned as if in pain, the assassin boomed out a belly laugh, Lando even cracked a smirk… but Natalina just looked mildly exasperated.

…Sonya had more emotion to her in strange or uncomfortable situations, right?

(ooo000000)

(Wednesday the 2nd of September, 1970 continued. Sestri Levante, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Inspecting the slight hill nestled in a valley of this section of countryside, and the abandoned two buildings already here that would need to be demolished before any construction efforts, Tyr turned to the civilian real estate agent and simply nodded his approval.

It would do, for the lack of proper or suitable building shells to start building from. Not ideal but given he had narrowed down a suitable location to the 'half of one mountain and the limits of two of three comunes', it was more than suitable to begin with.

The assassin turned his attention to his apprentice, who was curiously enough staring off into the distances almost directly southwest. Directly to the territory of a much older Cloud, who very well might include this land in what she would be deeming herself responsible for.

…interesting. Did Ottavio instinctively know he was near or within another Cloud's territory?

Was he picking up on whatever defined physical territory for Clouds some distance away?

Or was it merely luck and assumed observations giving him an ability he did not possess?

Regardless, it would be interesting to discuss with the older Cloud who did live in that direction… who wasn't there at this moment. He had in fact only brought along the younger Cloud due to the Storm-Cloud needing to be in Genoa for business related to her work in Mafia Land, just to see what his reaction might be.

So… either Ottavio knew full well who lived in that direction before coming out here, or there was something innate to every Cloud that told them when they passed through another's stretch of physical land.

Tyr would err on the side of skepticism unless another more educated in the topic said otherwise or he found the truth for himself. Likely, one of his assassins had figured out the young boy's feelings on being given to a Sky that did not want him and had capitalized on it to unnerve or upset him.

For whatever reason.

Truthfully his assassins seemed to delight in harassing one another to the point of murderous violence if not suitably distracted, a not uncommon occurrence he had been contemplating on and off since first arriving to the conclusion he needed to move his Varia off-site to their own headquarters. Half to prevent the maids from distress cleaning up the viscera and gore of two feuding assassins becoming out of hand, and partially due to giving the young Vongola boys more space to grow into themselves without even more salacious influences they might run across occupying part of their home.

Most of his assassins… were not child-safe.

"She is not there." Tyr informed his apprentice neutrally, earning himself a slight twitch and an acknowledging glance for the information before the child's attention returned to the middle-far distance.
"...there is still something there." Ottavio defended himself for his distraction, suspiciously eyeing the trees and the ridge of the mountain in question separating them from a thief's home territory. "I can tell it's not her."

Vindicated in his suspicion of what the young Cloud knew prior to their arrival, Tyr glanced backwards to the barely adequate road that led them here and the even younger brunette child simply watching them both pointedly from the dirt path, then to his apprentice's back who had not noticed the Mist charged with guarding Sonya's home during the day when she was elsewhere had been standing there since the civilian left them.

It was interesting Ottavio knew the Mist had done something, although his lack of comprehension on what was less than adequate. Knowing you should be aware of Mist-born mischief and being able to tell what was being manipulated were not innate Flame user skills unless one was also a Mist, as they seemed to be able to sense one another and their work from the very start. It was a developed skill acquired through repeated experience and exposure for the other Flame types.

An ability he had not started his apprentice on earning.

While it was not a surprising development, there were several young Mists in the Vongola Flame orphanage and daycare for Mafiosi dependents and Ottavio had belong there before being identified as a young Cloud, it was a promising development that his apprentice had a grounding in the skill already.

It did raise the question if how Clouds identified another's territory was also an acquired skill another Flame user could acquire rather than an inborn ability unique to their type. His young Cloud did not seem to be able to identify an unintroduced Clouds' territory from any other stretch of urban city or countryside, and this test had been fouled by another before he could learn if the younger could identify an older Cloud he knew of and her territory from unclaimed land.

Tyr needed another unbound Cloud to introduce his apprentice to before seeing if there was an answer to this question. Likely there would be several in Rome that would be agreeable to the experiment if he asked and adequately rewarded them for the imposition. A task for later, then.

Surely one or two had a difficulty that could or required a murder to solve he could then trade upon.

Turning around fully, he gave the young Usov his full attention.

"You're meters away from where Sonya reluctantly agreed she had to 'expand' her patrolling to." Reported the mischievous Mist without needing to be prompted, as he usually was when Tyr had a question of security for him during the time he looked after Sonya's castle for her. "The school she needs to send us to is in this little stretch of city and not hers. Unless she intends to found another school, and I do not believe she has the spare time for that."

"Understandable." He observed, neatly preventing Ottavio from fumbling when drawing out his knives in response to the unexpected voice interrupting his contemplation of the horizon by removing them from his apprentice's hands entirely. The blades were tossed to the grass underfoot, forcing the Cloud to start hunting for them or risk leaving them behind and being forced to do the night's training unarmed.

Young Usov contemplated his apprentice with a thoughtful air, sliding him a glance with wicked intent plastered liberally all over it. "He'll be attending school too, right?"

"Not this year." Tyr immediately denied on the young Cloud's behalf before the Mist could wind him up more, continuing before his apprentice could assume something and state it. "Next."
The delay did *nothing* about whatever the other child was plotting. "*I'll let the others know.***"

He… wasn’t sure if he was dreading or looking forward to how Ottavio navigated that minefield.

It wasn't so much a reversal of the dynamic between his apprentice and Sonya's godchild as an inversion and then further development of both. Before, one had been a Flame-able orphan and the other a deceased Vongola *Mafioso's* child, both of value due to situations beyond their control. Now Ottavio now had a status and rank as the Sword Emperor's apprentice, mainly on his merit than the child Cloud's, however Shamal was now the sole child of the only slightly previously established local power and equally as influential as such.

Neither of which could be adequately explained to their classmates, nor the intricate web of underlying assumptions and possible Flame-born discomfort, so it would be by implication and association either would be able to interact at all around the naivety of their fellow children. Who would then pick up on something to explain their behavior, depending on how sensitive they were to any one incident or situation, and react to that on assumptions that could not be supported or denied safely.

The dynamics between children were not Tyr's usual focus of interest, but if he was required to pay attention to track his apprentice's development in social spheres at least it would be something moderately interesting to speak to Sonya about.
Chapter 26

(Thursday the 3rd of September, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Apparently not cottoning on that Tatiana needing to leave to go back to work also meant she kind of had to do the same next, Shamal occupied the greater bulk of Sonya's entirely too big and too empty bed to sulk at her moodily.

With Marco providing an eternally happy counterpoint and contrast to the pouting boy with widespread limbs trying to take up any space she had to pack upon… which also meant her own Alek had to have a nice big portion of the bedspread to lounge around too otherwise he'd whine and sulk about it. A moody boy and two happy canines either directly or unintentionally trying to get in her way.

Which left her with a slim quarter of a king-sized bedspread to pack up her things on. It wasn't really that small, because her bed was big enough to comfortably sleep both her and Tatiana without either getting overheated sleeping next to another human-shaped heater during Italian summer nights. Sometimes even Fiorella too, without overheating her either.

Like… points for trying, brat, but a bit of a failure in application here.

"…I don't want you to go."

"Someone needs to afford this place, kotenok." She reminded him simply, tucking a hemp carryall with some emergency supplies Lisa gave to both her and Tatiana when the redhead turned twelve into her bigger suitcase just in case. She had two cocktail dressed and assorted accessories in there as well, with her slightly strained pieces of clothing for any possible nasty and risky work ahead of her. "If not me, then who?"

"We can sell Scruffy." Immediately suggested the brat, planting his hands on her bedspread and half-hoisting himself up in a very poor raised push up position when his belly was still on the bed. "I bet Verde would buy him!"

…oof, poor Peter. Sold out the very moment it could possibly benefit Shamal to do so.

"Selling people is not okay." Sonya informed him a touch more seriously, ruffling kinked brown hair with her off hand before fetching the very battered old boots Crina gave her to toss in her 'extras' suitcase. "Aside Peter not doing anything remotely worth being abused like that again, which would be hard to do because I really fucking hate human slavery in the first place and don't find it a viable alternative to anything… I don't think we'd get a whole lot for him. Certainly not enough to afford the taxes on this place."

Shamal face-planted into her thin cotton blanket, making an aggravated groan that was immediately smothered in Marco's belly fur as his dog got suddenly concerned there might be something wrong but surely he could fix by licking what little of the boy's face he could reach as frantically as possible. Of course that only occurred to the tri-colored dog after he was standing over Shamal's head trying to guard him or ward off whatever was upsetting his boy so much, so the contortions the canine then got up to ended up getting spittle and fur everywhere over both himself and the spluttering child.

She had to look away before she laughed.
Going back to just sulking in general once he hastily put himself and his dog back to rights, the Mist absently mopped his face with the sleeve of one of her cocktail dresses and sneakily tucked it back into her suitcase. While she was half-turned away trying to fetch out the rest of her small stash of makeup from where Tatiana had shoved it across her vanity to make room for her own.

"Shamal."

"What?"

Yeah, that was entirely his 'I've done something naughty' tone. However the soiling and probable subsequent destruction of her pricier clothing weren't things she could let slide in his little moody protest. Tugging the heavier piece of luggage off the bed, to thump on the floor a bit noisily than she preferred to be, Sonya crawled onto her bedspread to join the group simply hanging around watching her pack to whisper to him. "Can I tell you a secret?"

He gave her an entirely skeptical eyeballing that was entirely uncalled for as she leaned over him.

"I don't leave until Monday evening." She confided in a more normal tone, poking him in the part of his belly exposed to her as lightly as she could get away with.

Her brat gave her a deadpan glare in return as he fully rolled over to see her better and tugged his shirt back down. "Hey, mamma? Can I tell you a secret?"

Hmm… she kind of deserved it. Probably. "Sure."

Shamal plastered an innocent face on and leaned in to whisper. "I learned how to read a calendar last year, so I know. It's marked on the calendar in the kitchen."

"Smartass."

"But I'm your smartass." He tried innocently, batting wide-brown eyes up at her and trying for 'young and innocent' façade he could pull off a lot more believably than she could these days. "And you love me more than everyone else, right?"

"You stole that line from your zio, brat." As a matter of fact, she recalled the summer night last year Cherep claimed to be 'her weirdo'. Shamal should've been fast asleep during that evening discussion. She wasn't quite as sure where he picked up Tatiana's 'you love me most of all' bit, but it was entirely possible it was something her sister teased her boyfriend with before the Lightning went back to doing his Sky's bidding. "But yes, I suppose it might just be true in this case."

Instead of taking any of the obvious openings in her words, the Mist merely rolled over and sprawled out over her thighs to trap her in place. Thin arms wrapped around her waist, and he huffed into her stomach as he made himself comfortable. "I don't want you to go, even if you're not leaving yet."

Sonya idly picked white fur out of his disordered, wavy hair. "Unfortunately, I can't do that. I don't just mean because I need the money to afford these other idiots that thought following my ass before I had anything for them was a good idea. I mean I'm getting a bit restless just doing nothing, kid."

Tightening his arms around her hips, he firmly pressed his face into her belly before pulling back suddenly. "I know. I'm just… I really like you set aside whole summers for me, I really do mamma. But I don't like it when it ends."

Sinking her fingers fully into his hair, she idly scratched him behind the ears. This was how she figured out what level of pressure Alek would appreciate, and habits kind of died hard. "Now I'm mostly self-employed, I'll have more time. A lot more time, once this year is over."
"But you can also use that time to keep earning money for more people or more things for here." Shamal logically reasoned simply, neither judgmental nor sounding particularly upset by those facts. "And the more we live here, the more expensive it'll get. So the less time you'll have for me."

"I regret to inform you... I've already got that covered." Ruffling his hair until he pulled away and wrinkled his nose at her, she smirked wryly and touched the tip of his nose with the tip of her index finger before he could push his face into her stomach again. "I had Björn trained to handle my money for a reason. With enough to work from, which we might not have right now but we will by the end of the year, he'll ensure the castle will never run out by investing and whatever. So what I do now is the most I have to no matter what happens, and anything further is just for me to have something to do. So... no. I should have more time to spend with you next year, because I'll know how much we need to keep things and have no syndicate demanding more time from me where I don't want to be."

Tiny child fingers dug into her jean clad hips and given the tiny sniff he was happy to hear it. Or sad, but that wouldn't exactly fit right in this situation. It was possible, that she misread what he wanted and how he'd take the reminder, so she- No, nope. Shamal was crying. That was wetness sinking into her shirt. "...I thought you'd be happy to hear that, kiddo."

Otherwise that would be drool.

"I am."

Distinctly muffled, and a little whiny, but still completely confusing. "So... they're happy tears?" Sonya checked hesitantly, lightly running her nails down his back. A snotty sniff sounded, muffled slightly by her own ribcage. "Not crying. I'm not a baby."

She glanced to Marco and Alek, both of whom were watching her. Maybe a little judgmentally for not soothing the kid's upset, or maybe that was just in her imagination. Well.

A tug on a leg had Shamal letting go of her out of sheer surprise, so flipping him over was a relatively easy, and after taking a deep breath she blew a raspberry on his exposed stomach. The kid shrieked and started both hiccupping and giggling as he squirmed away from her, causing both dogs to startle to their paws and Marco to start barking his fool head off for whatever reason.

"There. I've fixed the problem." She announced smugly, not quite able to help the smirk on her lips. "Now you're really not crying."

Shamal kept on eyeing her strangely as he tried to control himself again, slinking off the bed and positioning his belly defensively below the level of her bedspread. That it gave him something to wipe his face with, to erase the last of the wetness betraying anything he might not want to admit to, was apparently the lesser concern for him than keeping an eye on her.

Sonya innocently pointed to the dogs, Alek watching them both curiously but who had sat down at least and Marco who was still growl-barking in either surprise or protest. "They weren't happy you weren't happy."

Slinking even lower, the Mist only stopped when he could just barely peer over her bedspread.
"You know, you're just tempting me to do that again."

He completely disappeared next, leaving behind two floating eyeballs just over the foot of her bed accusingly staring at her.

Of course, the dogs didn't understand the eyeballs were the boy. Marco cut off his barks with a yelp, bolting over to where the child should've been to investigate the odd occurrence while his brother cocked his head to the side in confusion. Shamal, focused on her and not his dog, ended up bowled over when the fluffy canine smacked right into where his mostly invisible head was and they both hit the floor with a very solid sounding thump.

Sonya couldn't help it, she laughed so hard she fell over and her ribs ached as Alek stared at them all in bafflement. Disgruntled by everything, the boy slowly slinked back to her rubbing the side of his head and shooting a terribly confused Marco on the floor dirty looks.

"Stop laughing." Shamal demanded sulkily, burrowing back into her side as the canines got situated again safely away from him.

"Ha… okay. But, um… hmm… how to put this correctly..." He didn't seem to mind when she sunk her fingers back into his hair, apparently he felt safer with her fingers occupied by something far from his little legs or his so rudely abused stomach. "You're being obtusely greedy, not proper greedy."

"There's a way to be 'properly' greedy?"

"Of course there is. I'm a thief, brat. I am always properly greedy. I'm a downright professional about being greedy." With a wry smirk for his dubious expression, she fondly tugged on a hank of his bangs. "If it's not going to last, don't dwell on how short you might have something. As long as you won't hurt it, have all of it. All of it now. Build up time and memories with whatever it is, have all of it when it's remotely possible, because to be frank nothing ever lasts forever. Why do you think I keep spending all summer and whatever few days with you? I know you're not going to be this young forever, so I want more of you now. I can always make up more money and reputation later, but I'm greedy for your childhood and that is an only once in a lifetime event."

Shamal set his pointy little chin on her ribs, puzzling over her advice while Marco jumped back up to join them again.

He'd either take it to heart or not, but maybe he'd stop obsessing over how short and limited time really was to enjoy himself some more.

"I do need you to do something for me while I'm gone, kotenok." Sonya changed the subject, threading her fingers back into his hair to lightly rub her fingers over the back of his head. "I need you to keep an eye on the other children for me."

He pulled away a little to eye her skeptically, more than just dubious. "Really?"

"You're the Italian here, brat. Mingxia's from a culture where public shame is used as a tool to control the population, where the family unit is valued highly above almost everything else. She's practically a step shy of being an orphan, in a foreign country, risking damn near everything she has or might eventually obtain to maybe work her way into her dream job on merit alone. It will be stupidly easy for someone to take advantage of her sensitive spots once they guess or get lucky… if you're not watching her back to fend them off until she has the culture down."
"Usov's Russian. He'll learn the culture eventually, but you have the information he needs to do it as it is." It would also get Shamal used to plotting with other Flame users, or helping/manipulating them and civilians to avoid unnecessary or unwanted drama.

Another Luigi thing, he had to learn how much manipulation was too much in social situations or semi-hostile incidents when it came to a fully free-thinking human being. They weren't things she could help him with before he made the mistakes to learn from, but Usov and Anna could.

The Mirror Lady for oversight on how things developed, the other young Mist boy for in the moment support.

He settled back into her, already plotting away a mile a minute.

"Furthermore… Rains. Mingxia might have a personal goal, but Larion doesn't. And I know for a fact Larion will just go along with whatever happens, but that might not just be what he wants out of anything. Make sure he doesn't follow the currents of events into something he might not want to be involved in."

By the wrinkled nose, and the half-pout on his face, Shamal wasn't nearly so much a fan of that task as he was keeping an eye out for Fong's little sister. Thankfully he didn't actually protest, because if he didn't want to Sonya actually doubted she'd try to convince him to do it anyways.

Because, again, she had more Mists she could task to what he didn't want to do.

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(Saturday the 5th of September, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

The Cavallone were as good as their word, three horses were sent the moment they deemed Mist-mom good enough of a caretaker to handle them. All three were past 'middle age' for horses, two breeding mares getting up to or just past fifteen years of age and a retired racer about eight years old but apparently with his competitive years well behind him.

Capitaine was the retired racer, leggier than the mares and with a chestnut coat only marred with a set of four white stockings and a streak on his muzzle. Not exactly placid for a horse, and for a nearly three/four-hundred-pound animal not being easy going was a little intimidating. A bit nervous described him more than well enough until Zinaida coaxed him into the stable to take a horse-nap.

After he recovered from his trip to the castle, he was a tiny bit calmer around the Beast Mistress but liked to eye Sonya very suspiciously from even a full acre away. A few hours after arriving in the first place, but maybe that would mellow out the more time he was given to adjust.

According to the rental contract for him he had 'stud services' already pending next spring and if she felt like getting into the business… she could advertise him in the 'right circles' and earn herself some 'gratuity'. For selling horse sperm, over a phone more than likely.

…just. Not her cup of tea. She'd inform Björn, because it was a way of earning money she wasn't into, but… eww.

Althaea and Feleti were the middle-aged mares, and the fuzzy bay Althaea seemed to tolerate Sonya more than any of the others. She wouldn't do more than stand there momentarily for a pet on her velvety nose if the Storm-Cloud held really still, then she'd immediately put distance between the two
of them. It was more than she could remember any other animal until Alek would do with her once she gave that question some actual thought.

Feleti was one of the native breeds of horses, something long-winded the thief immediately forgot the second after she had been informed of it, a dark furred horse with a dot of white on her forehead apparently called a 'star'. She was... incredibly placid, didn't really seem to give two fucks about anything going on, and was the one Shamal instantly gravitated to as apparently that was the horse he had done his Cavallone run 'refresher' course on.

Good. Sonya was somewhat impressed and appreciative of that kind of forethought. Feleti being well accustomed to her brat before being rented solved a lot of the faintly niggling worries she had about acquiring horses at all.

Mainly because they were significantly muscled animals, with hard hooves, and if one decided they didn't want to be a kept horse...

...but no. Her only hesitation about getting the significantly large animals were pretty much null now.

That appreciation of very suitable horses had her pausing to give it more thought for a few seconds. It wasn't overly suspicious of her, they were dealing with a criminal syndicate to rent the horses through...

It resulted in her leaving Zinaida and Shamal discussing something in the yard and calling the Inverted Cloud Guardian of the Cavallone's Eighth Generation, just to see what it was they were angling for.

"Have you ever thought of learning to ride yourself?"

Sonya scowled, on reflex more than from how she really felt and from the safety of behind a phone line. "I believe you would know more about how well any attempts to ride animals from me would go than I would."

Adelardo fucking laughed in her ear.

She had the slowly growing suspicion that Marco wasn't the only canine to have been 'Mist-fuddled' a bit on his arrival. Alek was honestly the only animal she could ever recall that liked her presence nearby, even discounting all the guard animals or house pets she had snuck around or past. Currently her fluffy menace was biting an itch on his flank with gusto, half leaning on her right leg for the support as he sought succor from whatever bugged him so much.

Even Pavuchky's mother had been a bitch and a half to catch without ruining her web, skittering around the thief's spider-catching implements of a glass jar and a piece of paper with determination.

For fuck's sake Luigi didn't like her and the dratted lizard liked Renato just fine, and the Sun overpowered her by factors.

"It's not impossible... just somewhat... difficult." The second Inverted Cloud she ever met insisted, once he got control over his laughing fit and cleared his throat. "It's also not entirely useless in your case. Aside the horses that you're obviously calling to lodge your appreciation for, you might end up in parts of the world where a car isn't the most expedient way to get around."

"You realize we as a type can entirely run faster than alternative pack beasts, right?" She deadpanned pointedly, and when the silence went on a bit longer than understandable she continued even more pointedly. "And with our physiology, can go further if need be?"
"Can you do it in public?" Adelardo countered with interest, which somehow was kind of more insulting than if he had asked it as pointedly as she had her two questions.

"I can walk out of public before doing anything noticeable."

The other Cloud hummed something tuneless, simply a noise of supreme unconvinced doubt. "Plainly put, I would appreciate you learning to ride."

"...Adelardo, your Capitaine will give me the evil eye the moment I am remotely within viewing distance. He's supposedly trained to tolerate something like me, right?"

"Well... he's trained to tolerate me. You are... a bit more than I am. Returning to the point...?"

"Why?" Sonya questioned bluntly, not against horseback riding lessons but without the time to dedicate to a new hobby right now.

...besides, Cherep might want to join her if she asked him once he had free time too. Then Shamal could come along and laugh at them both from his position of 'superiorly trained' for once. It might appeal to him a lot, the both of them.

"Well, there's a significant portion of our society that avoid having their life experiences rounded out with a bit of horseback riding. Or learning to approach or deal with trained working animals. On the rumor of 'our kind not dealing with them very well'."

"But... isn't that true?"

"It doesn't have to be." He countered cheerfully, a scuffle or something happening in the background of his end of the line she couldn't entirely make heads or tails out of. "I can use your attendance to poke the assess of a few others and prick their pride, so even if you only attend a lesson or two a year..."

"...maybe."

"I'll take it." Brightly admitted the Inverted Cloud as if it wasn't a flimsy as hell possibility of agreement in the near-far future. "Just let me know what dates work for you."

Her brother's world tour ended... when?

January? Sooner?

"I need to head to work here shortly, so there might be a thing nearer when you Italians celebrate Christmas. Maybe. I'll let you know."

"Good!" There was another scuffle in the background behind his voice, and something hard meeting something meaty like he had just punched someone in the face, which started to get her really curious. "I will look forward to hearing from you again when you feel ready to learn, Miss Bazanova."

...did he stress her name, or was that just her attributing the cessation of whatever was going on over there to it?

"Sure..."

(Sunday the 6th of September, 1970. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
Not entirely sure how he had been conned into this, and to confuse him took some doing indeed, Cesare absently held the leashes to the two fluffy canines that had grown in leaps and bounds over the bare two months they had lived in the castle.

Sonya couldn't hold her Alek's leash, given she was herself very patiently pacing Zinaida's progress on maybe attending Mass for the second time in her life and repeatedly reassuring the older woman the KGB would not magically know and come after her for doing so. Shamal was head to head with his fellow Mist Usov, discussing something he wasn't listening to.

From previous experience trying to eavesdrop on a discussion between Mist Flame users, and the migraine they tended to give those not entirely in the know, he knew better than to remotely try anything like that.

The Mafioso had very mixed feelings on the religious outlook of most of the castle residents. While on one hand it was delightful to learn that even in the face of systematic oppression from their government for a significant amount of years, there were still devoutly Christian Russians peppered about the Soviet Union… but on the other?

Even the normally outgoing 'Beast Mistress' of the staff was incredibly hesitant to trust in the safety of Italia's streets for something he would normally take for granted like 'attend a social meeting to worship God in public'. The poor woman, usually vivaciously out and about tending to her honeybees or learning to handle horses to become the caretaker for a small handful, was hanging uncomfortably close to the thief's shoulder trying not to wildly glance around as if a foreign secret service outfit would pop out of the shadows to condemn her.

It was interesting that it was Usov's mother, and not say the lovely and motherly Ruslana, that was the hidden Russian Christian on staff. Neither Maximillian nor Afanasii were either, they joined the Lovely Bossy Dragoness in being utterly unbothered by any lack of religion in their lives. Adrik had merely snickered when he inquired in that direction, Galina had just rolled her eyes when asked over one dinner, and Scruffy had dithered about what kind of religious views he had until his breakfast had long since grown cold on them both.

He wasn't entirely certain what the deadpanned glare from Verde was all about, but he could probably guess.

What should've been a barely fifteen-minute walk turned into a solid half an hour to get three-quarters of the way from the castle to the nearest church, but the assassin didn't really fault the outdoorsy brew master turned animal trainer for it nor the much earlier than normal time Sonya demanded they all attempt to leave at just to be on time for Mass.

As it was the end of summer, the morning was only a touch chilled when the breeze picked up. He could wait.

A lifetime of systematic oppression took more than another's example and a few demonstrations that attending Mass was now feasibly possible to overcome, generally it required personal experience countering what one assumed would happen and time to adjust.

The example helped, for sure, but not that much when it came to repeatedly reinforced cautions and a middling-to-low level paranoia that helped Zinaida keep her beliefs from harming her family.

"...God surely works in mysterious ways." Observed the actual pastor of the church the Lovely Bossy Dragoness decided would do for Shamal's weekly religious upkeep, coming up next to Cesare and watching the blonde yet again reassure the older brunette that the KGB were not in any way remotely close to Moneglia at all and coaxing her to maintain the speed that would maybe get them
another block in five or so minutes.

"He does indeed." He agreed cheerfully, wrapping the give in the leashes around his hand to prevent the fluffy menaces from rushing the crowd either gossiping or somewhat drowsing together in the early morning before Mass. Marco more than Alek, but if the pale pup caught sight or scent of a squirrel all bets would be off. "Consequently, Father Castiglione, I don't believe this is the last of the delinquent Christians in our little group."

"I'd be surprised if this lady was the only one." The older of the two men of the cloth that tended this house of worship studied the progress the two women had made in the few seconds since the assassin last checked, smiling faintly as one of Zinaida's recently made local friend noticed and hastened to help Sonya reassure the formerly closeted Christian that she would be perfectly fine with them.

Well, there wouldn't be enough in the good priest's opinion, but it would buy the castle residents some measure of time before their neighbors got nosey about how few there really were.

"This is also Miss Bazanova's last service before heading off to foreign lands for her work," Cesare continued, tugging the canines around so he could leash them to a railing and not need to hold their lines anymore, "I believe she leaves Monday evening."

The glance he earned was mildly chiding. Given the priest had gotten through three conversations with the Lovely Bossy Dragoness and still couldn't nail down her previous religious habits, and now this with her so busy with keeping one of her fellow Russians reassured enough to take a step forward out of the dark with her worship, it was likely Castiglione wouldn't be able to try again. Apparently he was good enough to realize the why might just be slightly manufactured, but also entirely willing to forgive it for a more than adequate reason.

As he was so clearly hoping to do before Mass this morning, standing about in time to join the Mafioso in watching the slightly concerning hesitance Zinaida had to attending a publicly held Mass, that he was only mildly annoyed at being stumped was rather good of him.

In fact, when Sonya slid away cautiously now that the mother of one of her Flame users was suitably distracted by the baking mother of one of the maids and might not need her presence to reassure herself, Father Castiglione didn't try again but just nodded a greeting to the thief.

She in turn just brandished the rolls of paper she had held onto for Zinaida for him to take possession of. "They're in Russian, I thought of making an Italian copy of each you could read easier… but these are the baptismal records for one Zinaida Samuila, called Novikova before her marriage, one Usov Samuil about a month after his birth… and her marriage license to Maximillian Samuil."

Cesare couldn't quite help himself, he snuck a peek over the priest's shoulder. There were tiny bits of Latin that gave the blocks of Cyrillic structure to easily follow, but he could not make heads or tails out of the information it should then show.

"I am sure, with the aid of one of my ecclesiastical superiors that know your native language, we can ensure there is an Italian translation fully recognized as a certified copy for both ourselves as her new church and herself." Checking over each of the three sets of papers, Castiglione nodded absently as he searched for and apparently found the correct little blocks of indecipherable text in the right places to at least assume it was in good order. "Nothing for yourself?"

The woman's features took on something tinged a little darker than just exasperation at the continued poking.
Slightly alarmed, the assassin swanned back into the conversation before that might just make the priest more than just suspicious. "Lovely Bossy Dragoness?"

"...it would mean I need to go find my father and talk to him about if I was baptized or not. I don't want to." Bit out the thief sourly, not focused on either the Man of God nor the Mafioso for the show of anger to be too off-putting.

"Forgiveness is a-

"Stop." Sonya advised the priest flatly, now strictly not looking at either man and up at the slowly fading blush of dawn in the sky instead. "He abandoned me before I was five, no communicated intent to return or anything. Just left me in what he assumed was an orphanage pickup spot for street waifs. The only reason I know he's alive is because my foster father hunted him down to find out why I was abandoned, and I point-blank asked him why when I was fifteen. He still doesn't think he did anything wrong."

Wincing, he slowly re-rolled the paperwork he had been entrusted with to keep safe until he could likely send it off to be translated. "I... see. While I will stress forgiveness is a virtue, perhaps in this case I will not ask you to try it before you feel you can. Can I request the next time you see him that you inquire about any records he might still have for you?"

"...if I can keep my temper in check, but I don't know where he lives now." Evaded the thief shortly, taking in a deep breath then just shrugging the entire topic off. "Doesn't Mass start in two minutes?"

Castiglione checked a pocket watch, shot her a mildly reproving look likely assuming the paperwork had been brought along mostly for the added benefit of distracting him from another conversation about the Lovely Bossy Dragoness' religious views, and hurried off to open the church doors for his congregation to join him in celebrating God.

Cesare slid a tiny bit closer to the self-satisfied woman. "Would you like me to visit this man? I've never gone to your Russia, might be interesting...?"

"...my foster father castrated him for it."

Oof. Ow.

Not reflexively crossing his legs took a bit of willpower, especially in the face of the very smug smirk now on her lips. "Fitting. Rough, but very fitting. Very Old Testament of your old man."

"I don't think Arseniy would make a good Catholic, but I'll convey the sentiments." Sonya claimed happily enough, turning to eye the plotting Mists holding what the dogs needed in water and a water dish still somewhat lingering on the edges of everything. "Thankfully, though, I don't need to go see him with or without Arseniy's help. I'd bet good money my mother has everything we could remotely want to know about ourselves already assembled several years ago. She's the type to not already just know, but to also have copies ready for me if I want them."

…and the priest would be under the impression she just hadn't yet asked or was avoiding a man with a damning sin to his name already for why she didn't give him her records. Not entirely false, but not entirely true either.

Cesare wondered if he cared what she had informed him might not be entirely the truth in certain topics, but if he bought into a false line from her then it was kind of his own fault for not catching it. "A good sign for Lady Fiorella's instruction, isn't it?"

"She's going to be fucking terrifying if she gets enough steam behind her." Sonya agreed somewhat
thoughtlessly, already way more interested in what her own and Zinaida's sons were plotting so intently and now half a step away from him towards them. "Go save us a bench, Cesare."

Whistling brightly under his breath some little tune the maids had playing on the radio when cleaning the kitchen Friday afternoon, he did as asked. Mentally wishing her well in the aims of Mist wrangling, and momentarily checking up on how well their Beast Mistress was adapting now she was in the clutches of that equally lovely woman that baked the bread he ordered for the castle's meals.

Decently well, the two were deep into a discussion on different types of yeasts in both breadmaking and mead brewing he honestly wanted to eavesdrop on more… but the crowd was moving as the church was opened for the morning congregations to find themselves a place and it would be interrupted in short order.

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(Thursday the 10th of September, 1970. Mafia Land.)

It took Sonya all of five minutes to need a distraction from wondering and worrying about how well Shamal might be fitting in at his new school when she should've been plotting to steal things around the world, then all of ten to catch herself attempting to distract herself with something she knew full well would just infuriate her.

She eyed the still empty and lone café table with the welded-on ash tray and only two chairs positioned around it, then the excessively full tables around the one little lonely spot, and after that shot a slightly desperate look at little miss brass ones as their usual waitress approached her. "He's gone."

"I know. Rumor's starting to circulate." Admitted the still young-looking woman that had probably watched her grow up almost as long as Renato had, since they had come here so damn often. She mustered up an only slightly weak smile for the thief, touched with something a little wry she wasn't going to read too much into. "Old habits die hard, I suppose."

"...I'm probably not going to come back." Sonya warned the other blankly, striving to not acknowledge why she didn't want to grab a cup of tea here anymore… even if this was one of the better French-aligned cafés on the main thoroughfare of the island.

Two streets away from Body Avenue, directly on the route to and from the air/sea complex, and entirely too convenient. A bit pricey too, because of course he had been that picky about even a casual setting way back at the start. Even before he knew he could make use of a little Russian girl-thief, so it was more on his own preferences than him trying to earn consideration from her.

"I'll miss you." Miss brass ones offered in return simply, folding her arms over her little serving tray/writing surface as she dallied probably a little too long with someone not a customer. "You two were probably my best tippers, even if you only had a cup each."

Yeah… well, if Sonya attempted to carry on as if nothing had happened the first idiot to take that other seat and try anything would be sans a head in short order then someone would have to clean up the gore.

She and Renato had, through sheer bloody stubbornness, ensured 'their' spots at this little café were permanently on hold for them. The hitman through whatever voodoo he did, and she because after a while people realized that if they stole her spot they'd consistently end up without the means to pay for their little liberation in short order.
…then they'd occasionally have to deal with a bored asshole of a Sun impatiently waiting for them to clear off so he could have his coffee time with a fellow Flame user right afterwards.

It hadn't happened more than thrice, but those three times had been… interesting to say the least.

Which actually fed into why they were such good 'tippers'. In order for those who controlled this little watering hole to let their 'permanent reservations' stand without getting involved, there had to be some kind of kickback in their favor to make up for the loss of revenue.

Old Mafia Land maxim, if you broke it you pay for it. Just twisted in a little way and applied to breaking off a piece of another's business rather than applied to something physically ruined.

Sonya paid her half by overpaying, frequently. Making them worth the inconvenience of realistically having a table less than they should. Renato didn't quite tip as much as she did, he just rounded up the total on his turns to pay rather than occasionally leave gems or small bars of precious metals behind when she had a pocket full, but she suspected he did the owners some minor favors for the whole arrangement to stand as long as it had.

"How about one last cup of tea, to go?" Inquired miss brass ones curiously, without any expectation or impatience in her tone that Mafia Land staff seemed to perfect well before ever serving the unrepentant assholes that was the island's more criminally inclined ranks.

The thief blinked rapidly, trying not to tear up in the middle of fucking Mafia Land's busiest street. "...yeah, that sounds good."

Fuck, she hated it when people were nice about her missing a 'dead' person. She was perfectly dry-eyed normally, but the moment someone said 'sorry' or anything else even half-assed sympathetic sounding she immediately teared up like an emotional twit as she felt sorry for herself.

Renato wasn't dead, theoretically. Just… currently missing. Beyond her reach…

Tea. Tea was a good suggestion, and she was just going to focus on that.

Would mean she could get her minor distraction and head back to prevent Alek from ripping anything up from being bored and left alone in a moderate sized flat intended to house three people. It was the longest her dog had spent alone, without her or his littermate at hand to distract him from whatever dogs did when left alone.

…if he tried to eat one of her fucking comfortable boots, she would make herself a tiny fuzzy rug out of his hide and that would be it for having a pet. Full stop, Sonya was not compromising her footwear for a bit of excessively loyal and therapeutic animal companionship.

Even if he was fuzzy and loved her unconditionally… even if she shoved three different rawhide and dried pig's ear toys in his mouth before leaving him to it today in hopes of avoiding the entire situation from occurring, if her doggo put one fang mark in her favorite boots he'd find himself shaved bare and sent back to Italy in short order. She'd make herself some dog-wool socks or something, instead of a rug she'd forget somewhere.

Sonya wasn't actually in the way of pedestrian traffic, being next to the little railing that sectioned off the patio arrangements from the actual street it was on. While she didn't have that bubble of no-touch thing going on anymore, it was rare anyone approached her with a specific intent to speak.

Edik, or Rasputin if that was still what he was going with as a handle, should've long since been at work, right?
The stupidly young mortician, she sort of recalled he should be maybe thirteen at best now, came up to her side with a stubbornly sour kind of frown. "Bazanova... there's a little issue."

"If you tell me, and I know for a fact the CEDEF had something to do with it, someone's going to die." She informed him bluntly before he could continue. "Has it reached the point that is a perfectly acceptable consequence you're willing to live with?"

The CEDEF agent, she was assuming because he was Italian and had the livery of a Mafia Land employee so either he was or he wasn't but would probably tattle to them the moment he could anyways, glanced the three tables over at the mention of the current faction in control of the island's security arrangements.

Scowling now at her, impressively enough, the young Sun hunched his thin shoulders and shoved his hands into the tweed slacks he was wearing under the lab coat she assumed he wore for work. "The first one asked me if 'I can really do' what you told your contacts about."

...that was fucking retarded.

"I'm not sure if the latest one is, or just was attracted because there's attempts going on and whoever he reports to wants to know what, but... I want it to stop." Rasputin glanced past her at that very only probably CEDEF agent likely trying to eavesdrop on them, then back at her. "Of course, since Igor was... well. Involved and hospitalized. It might not actually be them and the culprits could be another group."

"They have security oversight." Sonya refuted flatly, but she did have to give the kid the point as she weighed the mention against the threat she gave Ganauche.

The whole incident did draw a lot of attention to Mafia Land's morgue. Not just her own and the CEDEF, anyone on the outside looking in would be curious over just what the fuck had been going on. She didn't know how much Mafia Land's various branches of oversight talked to one another, nor it the CEDEF had to report incidents to the other five syndicates in control.

"One in five odds I will end up killing someone if I investigate." She offered slowly, still wondering how to track anything outside of whatever records the CEDEF kept on island-incidents.

With two years of living on Mafia Land under his belt, she was utterly unsurprised when the kid just shrugged that off easily. "I want it to stop interfering with my work."

"Fine then. How is Trotsky settling in?" She meant more in the way of 'how is Igor finding manipulating his body now he had time to adjust and whatnot' more than 'how is your replacement guard doing since his arrival' that most eavesdroppers would assume, but given it was Edik she'd give that tiny bit of sideways help to soothe everything neatly as they wanted.

"Cautiously." Rasputin deadpanned, taking a step sideways to continue past her to where the hospital loomed in the near distance. "Bazanova."

"Have a good day at work, Rasputin." She called after him politely, turning her attention back to boredly waiting for her tea.

Or she would've, had that Italian asshole not shot her once the Sun was long gone.

It took her a second to figure that out, given she had been forced backwards a step from what really felt like a stab-shove about mid-waist high and something hotter than the sunlight on an equator-ish island suddenly poured out of her left side. Which, when she checked, was the feeling of her blood pouring down her side and soaking into the blouse and skirt combo she was wearing today.
He had probably aimed for her heart and hit her lung, given the sudden *screaming* her nerves tried to do. Reflexively clamping her teeth down on the breathless cough netted her a mouthful of blood, and the thief stiffly turned to the vaguely confused looking man holding the weapon.

Because he *wasn't* a moron, he shot her again this time point-blankly aiming for her upper chest and hit something on her right side just under her collarbone.

*However*, because Sonya suddenly very much wanted to crush his head in with her bare hands, she flatly ignored that and started advancing on him. She also ignored everyone very noisily getting out of her way too, the wrought iron fencing getting crushed under her boot she had been politely respecting up until now, the shattered glass and iron table he attempted to put in the way between them, and the natural resistance human flesh had from being parted as she *slowly* squeezed his head from his scrawny body while he ineffectually flailed desperately until it popped loose.

Delicately placing her soon-to-be-new-soup-bowl on a nearby table she hadn't shattered into useless shards, the thief bent and checked the corpse's pockets for any identification. It wasn't *guaranteed*, the guy was a Mafia Land agent and all, but if he *wasn't* a CEDEF agent then she might need to pay a fine or something to whomever she had just deprived of a minion.

She found her assaulter's Mafia Land I.D. in his wallet, which had been a rather stupid place for him to put it. *Anyone* pickpocketing him would've then netted themselves the only surefire way to prove an agent was exactly who they claimed to be. She also found a significant amount of euros, not lira, in the billfold of leather too.

Strange. Even *if* the euro was a common currency everyone on the island had to take odds were that, in certain sections and especially when it came to the six syndicates in power, most here use their native currency instead where they could. Most businesses offer 'incentives' like sales or discounts to those using their preferred currencies, like a specific French restaurant she knew of and basically all of their bastardized 'Chinatown' slice Fong preferred to hang out in.

Mainstreet businesses like this café *had* to accept euros, but… why no lira?

Sonya spat out the mouthful of blood onto the pavement underfoot, pulling all the money out of the wallet and investigating what personal affects her victim had been carrying around. Each 'empty' slot intended to hold more I.D. cards or charge cards, the little plastic pocket for pictures that contained two condoms instead that got tossed in short order, and especially behind the fabric lining the main pocket that held the money.

It only netted her a whole lot of pocket lint.

Which wasn't all *that* strange, even if he was a moron and left his Mafia Land I.D. in his wallet with a significant amount of money. The only thing remotely personal on her was the glass armor on her arms Verde presented her with before she left and her necklaces, and maybe the mauls out of her weaponry collection. Renato had been the same way, aside the moonstone grips on his gun and his hat that was *it* for personal attachment to his outfit.

Not to say she expected anyone aiming for the hitman's hat to *survive* the folly of their choice. He was… *had been*… very picky about anyone 'ruining' his clothing.

This idiot very obviously had all the 'right' marks of a Mafia Land agent, and nothing else. Specifically nothing else, the wallet was too new to be broken in by body heat or sitting on it for years and before she drenched it all in blood the clothes had been brand new too. The gun was a freshly manufactured piece of hardware, and she bet if she spilled out the clip all the bullets would be equally as freshly made. *Depending* on the situation he might've been in before trying to shoot her,
the lack of lira could be explained away as just getting paid out and still needing to visit the money changers.

…however. Mafia Land agents were not the ones allowed to freely attack or murder their way through the island's population. No one would fucking trust one trying to disseminate news or updates to island policy around if that were the case, they also wouldn't be beholden to come to their rescue if they were being lethally harassed either. Contractual agents could murder whoever they wanted to risk, because they were not considered 'full employees' and you just had to take your chances with them.

Digging her pipe out of her purse, the thief sat her ass on the lip of the table holding her head and packed tobacco into it while she waited for miss brass ones to gather the courage to deliver her tea.

If she were a gambling woman, she'd bet this was a set-up. Maybe not specifically aimed at her for the whole situation with the CEDEF and Edik's Dying Will Flame abilities, but at the CEDEF in the end anyways.

They were 'new', and sabotage was always a method to fuck with another's new setup. Especially when you wanted to take it over, because then you could stop the sabotage yourself and be rewarded with the good-will for solving the issue from those already involved with whatever.

If she was just a tiny bit less rational than she was, her first impulse of murdering the fuck out of all CEDEF agents on the island might've happened. Even after she popped this guy's head off like a particularly greasy zit for the therapeutic gore she'd probably still have nightmares about later.

Right now, she just didn't care. She wanted him dead, now he was dead, and she was happy with that. Which left her enough rationality to start questioning why.

With her pipe lit, Sonya gingerly ghosted her fingertips along the raggedly bloody holes in the formerly cute top Cherep had bought her nearly a year ago. She hit something both sore and entirely whole in her own skin, meaning her variant of her brother's Cloud Voodoo was safely in place and plugging the gunshot wounds.

…mostly.

This was a fucking stupid time to be injured. She didn't have any time left to dither around, not if she was going to get nearly eighteen contracts done by the end of the year to keep the apartment she and Tatiana were sharing with her Lackey.

Blowing out a lungful of smoke to clear the incessant stench of blood starting to rise, and wasn't it interesting her smoker's cough had given her the trick on how to not splutter out blood when shot through the lung before ever being shot in the first place, the Storm-Cloud picked up her new head to inspect.

Maybe Mediterranean coloring, a long face, bit of a big nose. He could be Greek for all she knew, she just assumed Italian because he shared a lot of features with the Italians she had been living among for a while.

"Nobody in their right minds goes for anything less than a kill shot when trying to murder a Cloud, right?" She posed to Fong when he inevitably showed up, gingerly sidestepping the debris she had left littering the suddenly abandoned section of the café's patio. "Then either he was a shitty shot, or he didn't know I was one."

The Triad Storm eyed the grisly trophy in her hand, the body she had ripped it from, and then the
little pile of large denomination euros that were also equally new and suspicious she dug out of her victim's wallet. "...is there a reason you haven't disposed of the body yet? They tend to rot, Sonya. Especially in this kind of heat."

"Do you think he's Italian, Spanish, Greek, or Egyptian? Turkish maybe?" Asked the thief instead of answer that, because the gore was making the picking up pedestrian traffic avoid her little bloody slice of the road with near religious uniformity. She even helpfully angled her soon-to-be-soup-bowl at the man so he could see what she meant, earning herself a mildly chiding look from the Storm carefully disposing glass shards littering the walkway. "I don't honestly think he's a Mafia Land agent anymore."

That admission earned her the asshole's full attention, and he critically examined the evidence she had built up while someone likely panicked called him in to 'mitigate a Cloud's rampage' again. Closely. Fong had to physically hold his braid out of the blood pools when inspecting the pin that her victim had been wearing before she ripped the fucker's head off, and the Chinese man did it thoroughly enough she got the idea he was a little annoyed by whoever called him.

Not with her, because he was still polite and peaceful speaking with her. The little pinch between his brows he also got when they did the whole 'sleep deprive a Lightning' thing let her know he was annoyed, and the extra care he took in moving was probably him striving to prevent his Flames from tattling on him by Disintegrating whatever he so much as brushed up against.

Little Miss Brass Ones shoved open the service door to the café, with an entire tray of Sonya's preferred drink in hand and stiffly ignoring whatever was being shouted at her from inside. "I have your tea, Miss Bazanova. Excuse the delay, it wasn't my idea."

Sonya only had one clean hand, and she was using that to smoke with. Placing her new head next to her on the table, to prevent Fong from burning it up as he disposed of everything biohazardous next starting with the spreading blood stains from her decapitating assholes, she ran her own Storm Flames over her left hand to clean it and accepted the cup of fragrant tea. "The money on the table is yours... once I've used it to prove my point."

Her favorite waitress ever eyed the bloodstained money sitting on the table on Sonya's other side, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "Should be more than enough, I think... for the railing you destroyed."

Snorting around a mouthful of black tea, the thief lowered the cup back to the tray the woman was still holding and dug into a pocket. "Gold, silver, or gemstones?"

"Three bars of silver ought to do it. The tables are custom made." She explained a bit apologetically. "Although we get a deal on the chairs to go with them wholesale, so you're good on those if you have it."

Pulling the requested amount out of her pocket, she tossed the metal to the tray she was still holding and picked her teacup back up. "I think Fong could do with a cup of tea of his own, please."

"Of course." Agreed the downright professional brightly, as if she wasn't standing in the middle of a gore-splattered café patio affair serving tea to the one responsible, placing the pot of black tea on an abandoned and significantly less blood splattered table than the one the thief was sitting upon. "I'll be right back."

Noticeably, this wasn't a to-go cup of tea. Someone apparently didn't want to lose her as a customer.

Once he got the bulk of the glass shards and blood splatter off the ground, Fong deemed himself done with whatever he had been specifically called in to do. The Storm gingerly seated himself in a
padded wrought iron chair that had miraculously avoided the blood spray and folded his arms into his sleeves. "I do not believe I like this anymore."

"They get you with that 'please volunteer some time to avoid culture clashes' bullshit?" Sonya questioned around the stem of her pipe curiously, because aside wanting another tussle she couldn't think up another reason why he'd try cleaning up after her. "We have several in the hospital already, I didn't bother."

"I agree with that much." Stressed the Triad member, still either entirely unbothered by her mess or not finding it all that unusual to sit and chat in the middle of such a scene. "I did not agree to simply clean up what could be done in other ways."

…oh. Fong was going to do some 'driving points home' himself today too. He had probably taken whatever he had been asked to do and 'creatively misinterpreted it' to piss someone off, and would probably get away with it scot-free if he could drop or conceal the irritation she knew how to pick up on before he got around to putting whomever out of their misery.

"…this was not how I imagined this to go." Mused the thief wryly, ignoring red eyes flicked in her direction. "I specifically was trying not to come here for a completely different reason."

Fong kept looking at her, she knew because she was only seated slightly offset from him not with him behind her or anything. "I heard of the fate your… friend, came to. I will admit a moment of doubt or two about why you chose to attack someone on my way here."

"You visited just right after I was told." She informed him pointedly, unamused at the implication. "I was fine. That was also why I wanted to avoid this place. We… we came here a lot. Then some fucker shot me."

The Storm started, half-rising out of his chair before slowly sinking backwards and freeing one hand to rub his face tiredly. "You've been shot…? Of course, you've been shot. Why else…? Sonya, may I ask how long you were going to tarry here before heading to the hospital?"

"Well… I have a suspicion. And now I've told you, I need to at least inform one other before I'm excused from the situation as 'under investigation'." She reminded him even more pointedly, turning just a little to face him now even if the weird battle-happy dork winced at her doing so. Sonya waved her pipe in his direction just to get his attention off inspecting her stomach and the spreading bloodstains on her clothing. "Besides, I have a little sliver of Sun Flames. I'm fine-"

"You are not fine." He countered flatly, suspiciously narrowed red eyes and all. "If you could heal yourself, all those injuries you had in our spars would've-"

"Hey, Natalina! Do you think this guy is a Mafia Land agent too or not?"

The hitwoman paused at her name, blinked at her in a blank way that informed her she hadn't managed to make much of an impression on the other woman at all herself, and slowly traversed the no-go zone the gory scene earned her to get a better look. "…what, the hell?"

"He shot me, so I popped his head off." The other woman replied in Italian instead of English so she did too but hastening past that point, Natalina wasn't a Flame user so the skepticism was entirely… not understandable but not honestly surprising, the thief pointed the bowl of her pipe at the I.D. and the money then at the headless body still on the ground. "Like, either he was a fresh hire and being stupid or that's not an agent."

Fong, completely serene face and relaxed body language and all since the two seconds she last
looked at him, simply smiled blandly at the hitwoman he didn't know when she turned to get his opinion or observations or whatever.

…oh, that's right. Fong didn't speak Italian.

Renato's first ex shot them both another skeptical look when it became apparent he wasn't going to say anything, then actually started tailing up the oddities laid out to be examined. "Well… I wouldn't say he isn't… wasn't. But. I also wouldn't say he was either right now. Give me two days, I'll let you know."

"Great, have at." Sonya downed the last of her tea and slid off the table, snagging her leaking head as she freed up another hand to carry it. "I'm off, then."

"I will accompany you to the hospital." Fong cheerfully volunteered himself in his native language upon sensing the conversation was suitable to her aims and done with, somehow kind of pointedly to boot as he equally as swiftly rose to his feet. "I seem to have a few questions, if you would indulge me Sonya."

"How about no?"

"Pity." The complete asshole mused lightly as he drifted after her anyways. "For, I believe this is the third time now, I could've sworn."

He ducked the lit pipe on a ballistic trajectory for his forehead stupidly smoothly, although thankfully it was angled to end up in the sea and not buried into a building or four.

"-is that a yes?"

"I'm headed to the hospital," she informed him sourly, irked at the pointless loss of her pipe, "I believe you don't want to go there with me after another of these incidents. You had such trouble on the last one."

"I will survive." He insisted back, although it wasn't quite so serene this time and a tiny bit grudgingly. "Three times is three too many, Sonya. This should not be possible, not with how little you show the cause aside the cost in your clothing, but somehow it is."

"The only fucking reason you know is because idiots keep trying to shoot me around you."

"Yes, how unfortunate for them you do not seem to remotely care that they have." Fong observed wryly, and with no small measure of pointedness himself. "I am concerned, Sonya."

"…you can't use it."

"Understood."

"No, Fong. I mean it. You're the wrong type."

"…ah." That did put a dent in how willing the Triad member was to stalk her all the way to the hospital, but not enough to chase him off entirely. He dropped back two steps, instead of attempting to keep abreast of her path. "Can you instruct Ming?"

…ouch. Okay, she kind of saw why he was ever so interested. "Not… really? I might be able to twist it a little for her to use a bit of it, but… fucking around with the internals is a really bad idea. I wouldn't even attempt it myself if it wasn't for the whole 'getting shot' thing happening when it's really not convenient."
Fong stopped, and so did she because to be honest the hospital was not where she was going to go next even if she was shot, and for a long moment there was just a very weird expression on his face until he obviously decided not to bring up whatever he found odd to continue their line of discussion. "Will you?"

Sonya, as the younger sibling of a combustible dork who loved risking life and limb for adrenaline rushes that she learned the ability from, was then put in a little bit of a tight spot. She entirely understood his motivation in seeing if her inability to be bothered by physical assault could be taught to another, because his mostly civilian sibling wanted to go into criminal law and when the criminals didn't want jail time that put her directly in the way of risk.

Then again, wandering around the world with two bullet holes in her chest was so much a bad idea… even if she had no plans on getting it healed up before she caught up to Tatiana in Moscow sometime later.

…but she didn't have any more free time. Not if she was going to keep everything she had now into next year too.

"I'll put some serious thought in how to twist it for a Rain, but I am a little too busy to go back right now." Sonya decided upon, as that wasn't a promise she'd then have to break either intentionally or not.

"Eventually, then?" Pressed the Storm, apparently not because he thought she was trying to weasel out of promising him anything but because he really wanted whatever she was doing to spread to his little sister if the earnest expression he was showing her was anything to go by.

She was actually a little suspicious that wasn't what he was feeling, and given how quickly he could wipe everything off his face in front of an unknown she had a bit of evidence to back up her doubts.

"If it's remotely possible, and will not harm her, we'll see. There's the learning it part, after all. It might just not be possible."

Fong lifted a shoulder to excuse and accept that, giving her a slight bow. "Then, I'll leave you here."

"Uh huh." She bet not, he was kind of a suspiciously ineffectual helpful asshole sometimes, and because of that she had to go to the hospital anyways. Hopefully Kappel would have a suggestion on how to avoid another set of cysts, because really she didn't have the fucking time to deal with it.

"Hey, be helpful for once and go walk my dog."

He paused, half a step turned away from her, and then pulled back to face her again with a faintly puzzled expression. "You brought Alek here?"

"Yeah."

"To Mafia Land." The Triad member checked dubiously.

"Well… if I had left him in Italy he wouldn't be nearby to need a walk then, would he?" Sonya countered sarcastically, almost folding her arms over her chest until she recalled she was still carrying that severed head… that Rasputin could check out now she thought about it. "Why?"

"Do you... intend to leave him with your Lackey or take him with you while you work?" Inquired the Storm curiously, that stupid little crease between his brows appearing again.

"Take him with me. But, as I need to go to the hospital right now... he probably would very much appreciate the opportunity to find a tree and stretch his paws."
Fong hesitated, obviously gave whatever he was so confused by more thought, only to eventually settle on giving her a strange look. "Very well then. Should I leave him in your place or take him with me until you find us?"

Did she want to get into a protracted conversation with the Storm, or avoid the whole issue entirely even if that put her boots at risk?

"...I'll find you afterwards. Once I change my clothing and whatnot."

"Then you might just find us... ah, remonstrating with the individual that called me in."

Fong was going to take her fluffy white puppy with him to, likely aggressively in his very polite way, yell at whoever panicked about her killing the idiot that shot her?

Sonya, honestly, wanted to see how that was going to go. All of it. It promised to be either hilarious or probably bloody, and that tickled her fancy right about now.

However, the asshole would be suspicious if she didn't go change and visit the hospital... oh wait, the head. She had an excuse to set all the right rumors in play so he wouldn't get huffy or tell her sister about her delinquency, or for Mafia Land to become suspicious about the amount of damage she took to justify murdering what looked to be if not really was one of their agents, before watching that go down. "Okay then."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 10th of September, 1970 continued. Sydney, New South Wales, Commonwealth of Australia.)

Wheezing slightly, Skull tried rather hard not to stain Mauricio's colorful scarf-coat with blood or seawater. Fruitlessly, because the guy crawled into the surf to pry him out of it and was pretty soaked as it was.

It was really the most he could do, given he just got his bell rung rather jarringly to the point he needed his hype man's assistance to make it barely twenty feet.

Ground verses Skull's cranium, take whatever. This time with the addition of about three feet of ocean and a half-hidden outcropping of coral.

Unsurprisingly, he lost. Again.

Worse yet, he broke the bike helmet Sonya got him before they left home that first time. It cracked right off his head, and had been left with his bike half-buried into the surf when he misjudged the exact clearance he had to jump from wharf to wharf down on the harbor. Was about half a meter off on the gap, if he was pressed to be honest.

Huffing hard under his breath already, the Rain tipped him as gently as he could while basically losing whatever control he had on the Cloud's momentum into the beaten couch. It had been in this dressing room they borrowed from the New Theater group for prepping for the somewhat reduced world tour of entertainment acts before they got here, and was basically as far as Skull wanted to go right now.

"...Skull... are you sure-"

"M' fine. Go."
He could almost feel the Rain's dubious look aimed directly between his shoulder blades, but the guy did go off to corral speculation and defuse any kind of emergency response teams the stuntman didn't honestly need.

Skull had been pressing his luck a little too hard lately, but once Roy and Siegfried decided to just take the penalty on the chin and stay in Las Vegas with their big cats... suddenly Skull was the only headlining act the traveling show had. Not that he remotely blamed either of the magicians turned lion tamers, if he found out his previous employer had completely failed to pass on business invites for future permanent gigs then... he might just end up bailing out of a contractual obligation to smooth out that snub too.

Prying open an eye, which wasn't casting lavender light everywhere thank fuck, he attempted to pull himself off his other arm even if his whole left side just didn't want to cooperate.

He pretty much failed, given he had been laying on that arm. Instead, he ended up falling somewhat painfully to the floor of the dressing room and just decided that would have to do.

It had nothing to do with how badly the world was spinning on him right now, nor the inability to feel his fingertips going on. Skull just really wanted to lay on the floor, so that's what he was going to do.

...even if he was leaking seawater onto the floorboards.

A month of constant, three acts per weekend shows. Then he fucked up. He seriously needed a better ratio, or the whole effort of hiding his undying skills through rumors and implications would end up down the drain before the tour even got within sight of Europe again.

Seattle hadn't been too bad, he had been a bit nervous that he was headlining the whole show but that was on the rotation to be 'his' turn in the forefront anyways. Not a whole lot different, opportunity to see and play around with an inexplicably formal biker gang that did their own show or not.

Japan had been really fucking interesting, seriously interesting. Not just because that was 'technically' when Skull was the whole headlining act to the tour, even if it was in the States where he got the news he'd be doing it. All the billings and advertisements were changed well before the tour reached Japan's northern island and the city of Sapporo, making it all about the stuntman mainly and the other acts secondary.

It had been what they agreed to, taking contracts from one place and ending up in others without needing to pay for shipping themselves or arranging their first show themselves in a new area. Skull had still been a bit off-kilter without a 'rest stop', but it seemed fans of the circus seeped into all cultures so the showing hadn't been too bad without the previously promised lion tamers front and center.

Now he thought about it, he was really lucky Viper agreed to be his agent this time around. There probably were clauses the miser argued and haggled him out of that would've made every other stop 'pro bono' instead of paid just in case his fellow headliners decided to split. Not that he expected to be kind of knifed in the back like that, he read his contracts thank you very much.

It was just, as the Mist would put it, good business sense to avoid paying out more than you had to.

If Diana didn't make it out of her oceanic dunking well enough to be fixable with just one all-nighter or preferably just enough hours to dry out the parts to her engine, he needed to buy himself a new show bike in a fast hurry. If he was doing every other show free of cost, then he'd have significantly
less to work with to make emergency repairs or source a new bike with.

Skull was building up a modestly tidy sum on this tour, but that sum wasn’t here. Most of the money the show made locally was spent on housing, advertising, renting venues or paying insurance for the shows, buying ticket reels to sell, concession agreements with local businesses, tempting musical acts to close out the show with, shipping things to their next port of call, and paying the other bills that arose on the road. What was left was sent back to England, to be calculated out and divvied up into the proper accounts to await the holders collecting.

Notably, they weren't in England. Strangely, Australia had a lot of things similarly named to places and things in jolly old England… but it was way too hot to be a European island nation.

The dressing room door suddenly flew open, banging off the wall noisily and giving the stuntman a headache, and Mauricio whirled around it like a colorful blur as it slammed shut again. "Skull, I regret to inform you that the reason you survived without major injury was due to hitting seawater and not the wharf. Your bike hit the wharf's supports."

"…really?"

"No, but go with that explanation." Insisted his Rain wryly, back plastered against the so noisy door and likely trying to buy him a few more moments of grace to be 'less' battered than he felt currently. "You are due to be interviewed and be checked over by a medical professional in five minutes! Give the man some privacy to change, please!"

He hit the pier's support pillars… okay. That would explain why his ribs and right arm felt so funny. "…got it."

Well, if it was himself that got totaled and not his bike… he didn't have to replace Diana. He just needed to acquire a new bike that looked close enough he could swap them out if anyone asked about it later.

…or he could get Diana repainted. The blue had never really sat well with him, he could get her in a more suitable color now. Like purple.

He should've thought about this sooner. If all his bikes shared the same coloration, he could probably swap them out easier if he ended up face-planting into things normal people didn't survive often. Not entirely, they'd have to be of similar model or make for the switch to work right, but if the bike obviously survived intact no one would really question if he could've done the same.

"…Ciceron, I need you to do me a little favor while I chat with the nurse or doctor or whoever wants to talk to me."
Chapter 27

(Friday the 11th of September, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's apartment, Mafia Land.)

Sharing living space with two Russian sisters didn't usually interrupt Björn's work or living situation too much. Occasionally Tatiana slammed the door behind her at odd hours when she was in a tearing rush to get to the hospital in response to some emergency, Sonya usually just sent him a lot more books to process as either 'safe enough to send on to her castle' or 'too risky' than show up herself to date.

Alek wasn't that different than his mistress, when she finally got around to using her room on Mafia Land and for some reason brought her pet with her. The canine only really liked her, would tolerate the Lightning-Storm only for serving him his kibble or refreshing the water bowl, and just generally did his own thing too. Mainly with an overabundance of dog toys his owner showered him in to occupy his little mind while she was distracted, the spoiled menace.

The canine whining pitifully, and scratching at something wooden like a door, was more than enough to inform the Lackey something was seriously wrong. Middle of the night or not he didn't want to deal with replacing any doors just yet, so he groggily rolled out of bed and shuffled out of his bedroom to figure out what was distressing the poor animal so much.

Maybe he wandered out of his patron's bedroom for some reason, likely for water or food, and found an ill-timed breeze shut him away from his mistress?

Lightning Flames arced across his fingers, giving off more than enough glow to see where he was going and not stub his toes on the slightly oddly positioned furniture in the common area of the flat. The young animal shot him a desperate look, whimpering again as he scratched… lightly… on blood splashed wood…

Alarmed, Björn lunged for the door and wrenched it open.

Sonya shot him a dirty look for his haste, scrubbing an alarming amount of fresh blood off her stomach and arms in their well-lit if a bit bloodier than normal hallway bathroom. "The fuck, Lackey."

"Were you attacked?" In the middle of the night?

Was that what woke him up, or just Alek's distress over the situation?

"No, I just forgot I was injured." His patron deadpanned flatly, seemingly more annoyed at her bloody state than upset as she liberally applied the washcloth to her tank top even if that just smeared around the stain growing on it. "Calm down."

"Calm-! Dama, you're bleeding!"

"It happens. About once a month." Tossing a hand towel, already sticky with blood, into his face the woman turned the faucet on again to rinse out her scrap of cloth to try cleaning another area on herself. "This is not much different."

Björn made a strangled noise of protest he immediately pretended hadn't come from his throat when she blinked in surprise and glanced at him sideways for it, catching the towel before it hit the floor and soaked up even more tacky blood. "How do you forget you're injured?"
How did she get injured in the first place?

How didn't he notice?

"It is pretty easy when you are fucking asleep." She finally deemed everything she was wearing ruined, or at least too far gone to bother with, slapping the stained washcloth into the sink and hiking up the tank top to pull off. "Fuck this bullshit, I am taking a shower instead now you are awake."

He hurriedly turned right around when he realized that, and a pair of equally bloody shorts, were all that she was wearing. She threw her blood smeared shirt at the back of his head, probably still very irritated with him yanking doors open on her while she was in the bathroom.

"Go… fuck. Alek now needs a bath too, thanks for that. Go do the laundry, Bjørn. You will need to strip my bed, and maybe mop the floor a bit…” The now splotchy red and faintly pink-stain pawed puppy was seized by the ruff of his neck and dragged past the Lackey, apparently happy to go given the lack of yelping or more whining.

The bathroom door was then shut on Bjørn's ass, forcing him forward a few steps or risk face-planting in the drips and puddles of blood Sonya left behind her trying to get somewhere she could clean up within.

Of course, that was the point the poor animal realized what was in store for him. The shower turned on and, given the new whimpering and whining he did as she likely dumped his fluffy ass in the tub for them to clean up in, Alek was not a fan of bath time.

Bjørn nervously took in the midnight mess he was tasked to clean up, and the stained fabrics in his hands.

Everything was getting bleached. He didn't quite care where or what it all was, what colors it all should be, or even what the recommended cleaning procedures were, all of it was going to be scrubbed clean enough a forensic team would have trouble figuring out if anyone had been injured at all in the apartment.

If she didn't want her grey tank top to turn into a mostly white tank top, she shouldn't have thrown her things at his head.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 11th of September, 1970 continued. Mafia Land.)

As Bjørn was still low-key pissed off with her this morning, and yeah she saw that irritably dismissing what he found to be an alarming middle of the night scare had upset him a fair bit so she didn't mind his attitude right now, Sonya decided not to hang around the apartment for at least a couple hours.

Alek went with her, because for one why not and on the other hand she really kind of fucking hurt right now.

There were two stabby, achy not-holes in her upper chest. Faintly miserable was her entire mood summed up, so far from the source and any adrenalin that let her ignore the pain in the first place and now not tired enough to try sleeping it off.

Not that… that worked out too well for her last night.

Her dog was somehow entirely aware she wasn't feeling good and was being clingy too, probably
because he had been the one to wake her up when a couple bullet holes suddenly sprang open and poured out copious amounts of blood. He wasn't investigating all the new scents and sights at the far end of his leash but sticking stubbornly to her left side and growling at everyone he could get away with growling at. Which was basically everyone, given most Mafia Land residents didn't like getting within ten feet of her today and most others probably heard the rumors of her ripping someone's head off with her bare hands or were being pointedly warned of it as she passed by.

Leaving her dog behind for the morning probably would not go at all well, for both her drive to not let her pet become destructive in his distress/boredom and giving her Lackey some time to himself to settle down in.

She didn't specifically head out to the Chinatown section of Mafia Land. Frankly the French or Americanized Quarters would've worked to fulfill her aim of getting something to help her body regenerate flesh and the blood she lost the last twenty-four hours, but to be honest the part of the island Fong generally haunted had better tasting 'breakfast-y' foods with red beans in it.

Protein, sweets, and fluids. Tatiana's orders, when she had donated blood for old man Zolotov, for not only blood loss but for getting shot given she had grudgingly shoved a plate of steak and cake at the old man's stupid son too.

Aside being quietly concerned with how much of her own blood volume was being Propagated right now, and how long she could hold the 'patchwork' Cloud Flames over her bullet holes before she forgot again to lose even more blood through, the thief just wasn't up to dealing with the faint suspicion and wariness that usually underlined any new interactions around the island.

Therefore, she went to the only real 'sector' she knew she had an at least moderately or better neutral reception within that she hadn't seen Renato in to depress herself more.

She got herself some number of Jiaxing zongzi, the street side food merchant reassured her would at least contain a few with red bean paste and several others of various savory fillings, and wandered on a bit until she found a decent place to sit and eat at. Which ended up on a bench outside a little tea/inn thing with the markings for being under the protection of the Wo Hop To Triad.

She vaguely recalled this place from the first honest meeting she and Fong had, that didn't devolve into her destroying part of Shanghai or pitching shit at his head.

Well… she tried to eat her breakfast outside of the establishment while contemplating if they served tea this early, the stupid sticky rice balls wrapped in reed did not want to be unwrapped by her.

She instantly discarded her first one into Alek's eager maw once she ripped it up enough to see what filling it had, which was something mushrooms. He didn't seem to remotely mind the mangled nature of the food and totally appreciated getting the weird husk thing it had been cooked or steamed in to chew or lick as he wanted.

Sonya eyed her dog's back as he wagged his tail furiously and masticated the plant matter to get every bit of edible food, slowly teasing another of the bundles open. Cesare had informed her canines were not to be fed a lot of spices, as canine nature simply wasn't adapted to eating spicy or strange extracts human beings tended to liberally douse their meals in. Alek seemed fine with a bit of mushrooms and rice to bolt down, but maybe she shouldn't give him more than that.

…unless there was another mushroom filled one in the stack. He could have all the mushrooms with her blessing.

She was nibbling on the second of the zangzi, filled with salted duck egg, which wasn't what she had
been looking for but was a damn good substitute for the protein she needed, trying to ignore Alek's intent preoccupation with staring greedily at her breakfast when Fong leaned over her shoulder and stole a pack of rice-filled whatever things from her small pile of them.

Without asking, the asshole.

"I live here, well... for now." The asshole informed her pointedly when he noticed her irritated glare, nimbly unwrapping the steamed rice ball without getting half the sticky mess stuck to the wrapper like she had. "Did you require something?"

"Oh... no. Actually. I just wanted breakfast and wasn't feeling like trying to find a new set of restaurants."

Fong blinked at her slowly over the perfectly unwrapped food he had just taken a bite of, probably confused.

Sonya grimaced and didn't explain Renato tended to be the only reason why she knew of a few more than decent restaurants around the Italian part of the island, and rehash why she didn't want to go to those places anymore. It was either those super high-end eateries the hitman deemed 'adequate' for his needs, her sister's equally stupidly expensive seafood places, or street vendors that didn't always stick to the same street corners between her infrequent visits.

Then a few lunch bars, more buffets than actual restaurants, but again lunch bars. She didn't honestly know if they did breakfast or were even open before ten island time.

She didn't particularly feel like being miserably in pain and upset this morning, so she had specifically not gone to the places she knew of.

"Just... don't ask."

"Very well." Stepping forward, the Triad Storm stooped to pat a suspicious Alek on his chest momentarily before moving on around her and her pile of breakfast to the other half of the bench. Curiously, her dog didn't seem to greatly mind but also didn't seem a fan of the interaction getting in the way of his staring contest with her food. "Good morning. It seems to be a fine day, yes?"

Shooting him another dirty look for helping himself to her breakfast again and the overly cheerful tone, the thief just sank down a bit in place and worked on eating the rest of her second sticky rice ball.

"...you still feel the pain, right?" Observed the man critically, eyeing her form suspiciously.

"Sonya-"

"Not in public, Fong." She didn't necessarily need reminders, her chest hurt more than enough as it was. His knitting two or three clues together could be done somewhere where they weren't for sure being eavesdropped upon by a handful of others, well-intentioned or not. "Change the subject."

"I find these continued interruptions and avoidances somewhat suspicious." The totally unhelpful asshole chose to continue with, which while it was a different subject she equally didn't appreciate this one any more than she had their last one.

"Well, if you bring up topics I don't want to go into then I'm going to interrupt and avoid it. I fail to see why you are remotely surprised or concerned with my habits of doing so." Sonya shot back sourly, discarding her wrapper-thing to doggy possession before randomly picking another of the rice-ball-things to try next.
"…not feeling well?"

"As you pointed out, I can still feel it." Alek was entirely more into breakfast than she was now, and she hadn't really eaten a whole lot. She knew she should at least bolt down another, but the will to force it was entirely lacking.

This one wasn't red bean paste either, something pork and peanut tasting instead.

While Fong grabbed his third and the last of the triangle-shaped steamed rice balls, the thief just focused on maybe eating every other little piece she tore off her third one and tossing the other half of the bites for Alek to snap out of the air.

She wasn't particularly fussed when the Storm wandered off without another word, as she hadn't come out here to talk to him in the first place and at least he kept her from wasting decently good food. Her doggo was just enjoying the treat and being entirely too happy to 'play' with her food, which was frankly good enough as it seemed she was in the mood to piss off everyone today.

Surprisingly, it took him only five minutes to return holding a deep bowl of something chicken-ish he forced into her hands. Given the look of the flesh left in the thick broth, chicken feet soup.

At her dubious look, Fong smiled back serenely while still looming over her. "I can find something your Western sensibilities will cringe from even more, if you'd like."

Weirdly nettled by the almost dismissive attitude he had, she flatly ignored the ass and cautiously sipped a tiny bit of the weird soup just to be sure her stomach wouldn't stridently object.

…tasted just like cream of chicken soup, honestly.

Exactly like straight cream of chicken soup, that usually came out of a tin can and she poured into mostly overcooked rice for the occasional quick bite on the road when nothing serving edible things were open where she was at whatever time of day. She'd know, she had it at least twice or more times a week when she wasn't anywhere with good restaurant options.

"…I was a little afraid it'd be too vinegar-y." At the cocked eyebrow, she hitched a shoulder up and took a longer sip now it hit something her body decided it needed that the rice balls hadn't. "They pickle pigs' feet in way too damn much and sell it by the roadside in southern America. Just two sniffs and you just know it's a bad idea to try on a whim. Also, just so you know, when someone's feeling queasy or nauseous it's not often wise to give them something they'd previously indicated isn't something they're used to."

The Storm snorted rudely at her admittedly weak defense of her choice to avoid the food item before. "I shall endeavor to keep it in mind, if I ever come across you actually ill and not just simply miserable."

Sonya set down the bowl of chicken feet soup, far enough away Alek couldn't reach it to lick or snag a bit of bird bone to get lodged in his throat as long as he kept his paws on the ground as she had been trying to teach him to do. "Look, I wasn't aiming for company. I'm probably going to piss you off if I keep pressing it, so I'm just going to go."

"Ah, you'll find I am significantly harder to 'piss off' than this." Fong brightly insisted, while continuing to stand in her way like the utterly unhelpful lout he really was on the inside. "And no. Finish your soup, I believe you came all this way to replace what you lost yesterday for a reason, right?"

…and last night. The 'how much blood loss did she really suffer' question was still more than a little
concerning, to be honest. Between her and her soon-to-be-new-soup-bowl guy, there had been a lot of blood at the café yesterday, then forgetting her variant of Cherep's Cloud Flame Voodoo had not helped at all.

Sonya thought about it, eyed the asshole thoughtfully for a second, then glanced down to her slightly drooling doggo still locked into an intense staring match with her nearly forgotten soup bowl.

Frankly, she wasn't in the mood for more chicken soup. As she came out here for red beans, which could be made sweet and sugar was the current thing she was missing from her sister's orders, the thief gave him a bland smile he was instantly suspicious of if how narrow his red eyes went was any indication.

A quick whistle had Alek obediently jumping into her arms, staring contest with her chicken feet soup or not. Sonya immediately bolted with her armful of pet, aiming to find something she wanted to eat today even if her appetite was going to be so picky about it.

Unfortunately, Fong was instantly at her heels and intent on following her ass. Almost like he had been half expecting her to run in the first place.

Jerk.

(Saturday the 12th of September, 1970. Mafia Land.)

Twenty-four hours of emergency investigative work to ensure Renato's last piece of tail didn't fuck up and earn herself a hit, when she had a kid to tend to for him and now the rest of them, Natalina didn't exactly appreciate the damn thief wandering off to parts of the island she hadn't ever found a reason to acquaint herself with.

The Triad organizations weren't… her cup of tea.

Venturing into their little knot of densely packed in territory anyways on the recommendation of various rumors claiming the woman she was looking for had headed vaguely there, upon arriving to the right sector she took exactly four straight hours of inquiries and not so minor bribes to figure out where to go.

About every five feet the targeted clientele seemed to change, from spa parlors to dry cleaning services to nail salons to full scale restaurants and what looked to be wholesale shops of shitty knock off brands covering everything from shoes to clothing brands. All of which were stacked at least three stories high, the tallest Mafia Land allowed for commercial businesses that needed more floor space than supports getting in the way.

'He shot me so I popped his head off' being something Bazanova was entirely capable of was a mind screw of its own, bolstered by just how willing Mafia Land residents were taking that particular rumor to heart to create this lead for her to follow. Not just physically strong in a way that somehow avoided the drawbacks of extreme strength, but willing to murder via her power instead of just bend metal bare handed was a step further than she had been expecting to hear about the younger woman.

Or see.

Weren't thieves supposed to be non-confrontational creatures?

Greedy, of course, but not a person able to dish out Lando-levels of violent retribution for any insult. Coming with a high and significant risk of being backstabbed, like any other criminal type but not a directly straightforward hazard.
Natalina very nearly walked right past the damn woman, taking tea with that same Chinese guy dressed in red from two days ago in the ground floor common dining room of what looked to be a dorm/Chinese apartment building. Whatever the two were discussing wasn't exactly friendly and apparently involved a tuft of pale fur masquerading as a guard dog pressed up to Bazanova's back.

Probably in whatever language they had been speaking in when they went off that day, because that was not English nor Italian. Odds were Chinese, but she had never been very good at telling the different Eastern dialects apart.

The hitwoman got about two steps into the apparently casual drinking establishment before someone lurking in a blind spot near the doorway attempted to block her way, only to be called off by the red-eyed Chinese man in three sharp-sounding words. Everyone present shifted with her addition anyways, but not nearly as much as she had assumed upon spotting her quarry in an Asian inspired tavern-thing.

…the hell was a Russian doing here?

"Intentional or opportunistic?" Said woman questioned in lieu of any kind of greeting, although given the topic she could entirely understand why the other woman wanted to know if she was in the clear or needed to run about now.

"Opportunistic." Natalina confirmed for Sonya slowly, joining the low table cautiously and trying to mimic how she had her legs folded to bring her to the same level as she was apparently expected to. "It wasn't you, it was just an opening to take advantage of."

"That backfired." Interjected the Triad tough with nearly visible amusement that wasn't entirely due to her clumsy attempt to sit on her heels devolving to just sitting on her ass instead, slanting a look to the thief that did the messy murder in revenge for an assault. "I suppose then-

"No, wait. Was the guy Greek? Or Turkish?" Bazanova interrupted without a damn care, even if her still unintroduced associate was apparently influential enough in this establishment and syndicate. Enough to have an outsider allowed in with just one order and they both likely relied on his good grace to remain unmolested from the others idly watching the three of them.

The intensity of how closely they were being watched somewhat unnerved her, half due to how much dimmer it was inside than out and probably half due to foreigners occupying their space, this was a lot more attention than she had counted on for this discussion.

"…Spanish." From Cuba, actually. Second generation immigrant who had the looks still but not the speech patterns nor native insights to pass more than a general glance over. Hence why, even when getting his head squeezed from his shoulders, the victim didn't speak a word.

It would've blown his whole charade wide open, and definitely had once Natalina tracked his movements back far enough to figure out where he came from. Someone had picked up the guy, specifically removed far enough he wouldn't have the social or street knowledge to not do exactly as he tried to do to a significant Italian power, almost at random enough to make it difficult but not entirely impossible to do exactly what she had to clear the thief's involvement.

The CEDEF had taken over now, they'd research how the imposter got into Mafia Land and what exactly he had been trying to do, but Natalina's contribution was over with.

Sonya skeptically stared at her for a long moment before huffing somewhat sourly that jarred the white as hell puppy lounging directly behind her. "Oh, yeah. That is a thing…"
"What thing?"

"North and South America are a whole ‘melting pot’ thing of various cultures. Everyone has some little enclave of people there, so nationality is not actually a good measuring stick to guess origin from when the Americas get involved." With another disgruntled little huff, she sat back on her heels and shot the man a pointed look. "So we both lost that bet."

The well-muscled Triad tough with a long braid simply hummed something that could be mistaken for assent, utterly unconvinced and not remotely concerned if either of the women picked up on it.

That was not too far from the behaviors she had assumed a thief would have, rather than the impossible perfect strength she also possessed. Greedy enough to bet on everything, and yet weaselly enough to get out of paying her half if it came down to it.

Sonya had been digging out an ivory and dark wood pipe from the satchel situated next to her left thigh, suddenly shooting her a strange look with a packet of pipe tobacco in one hand and the implement in the other. "Do you smoke, or remotely care if I do? Fong over there insists he does not mind… but I think he is just humoring me."

"I don't care."

Lighting the pipe, somehow with a thumb instead of a match or a lighter, Renato's last lover gestured from her to the not technically introduced man she at least knew as Fong now with the stem of the utensil as she blew out a lungful of greasy smoke. "And this is Natalina, Fong. She is… a… well, hitwoman."

That was what passed off as an introduction for Russians?

The man was utterly unsurprised at the curt behavior and treated the off-handed and rather gallingly dismissive mention as something significantly more flattering to her. He courteously inclined his head while making a gesture to some of their lounging watchers to have her included in the drinks on offer too. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Natalina."

"Likewise, although I apologize about being so occupied that first time." A tray, apparently left somewhere near the staff door to the kitchens given how quickly it was fetched, was brought out and she was served something appreciatively dark and aromatic. "You have coffee here?"

"It is a passing fascination, I believe." Fong informed her pleasantly, neither taking her surprise as offensive nor as a slight to his culture as frankly several others she knew of would do gleefully. "We rarely indulge in most of the trade that passes our ports, but as it is part of the trades we handle… of course we try a little bit of everything."

This was apparently aimed more to the blonde than her, who bluntly ignored them both in favor of puffing on her pipe lazily and contemplating whatever dark liquid was in her own cup. Bazanova eventually flicked her grey eyes back up to Natalina, once enough time passed to make it slightly awkward but not enough to be entirely rude to a new arrival. "I appreciate your work, by the way. You had more than a couple more hours to make a ruling, more like half a day or so left."

"It wasn't remotely that hard." Scoffed the hitwoman sarcastically, belatedly biting back her attitude behind her teeth but not quite able to stop the automatic boast in front of two non-hitmen. At least, she knew the other woman wasn't but frankly she shouldn't let her mouth run on her professional pride without at least gathering more information on 'Fong' and knowing his limits.

Even if he seemed almost queerly non-reactive to what others would find disquieting amounts of
gore splattered around him or breathtakingly rude behavior in front of those he probably worked closely with or required the obedience of.

"They weren't quite able to cover their tracks so quickly?" The same man asked, apparently just to make polite conversation.

When they were imposing on him.

"Since Bazanova called me over almost three hours after the idiot got off a plane, I had more than enough time to start tracking his movements back to a meeting of dubious origin where his story changed while my guildhall's minions ran the island-centric background search." Two red-eye flights, five hours of total investigation, three interrogations, and a hefty bonus for completing the investigation and proving a security breach under her belt later, Natalina thought to reassure Renato's last lady she wasn't going to be murdered for her 'popped his head off' violence… but apparently the woman had not been remotely concerned by the possibility. "They got nothing, I certainly didn't find prior Mafia Land connections, so the ruling is infiltrator."

Although, on second thought, the addition of an introduction to a significant member of a Mafia Land Triad was nothing to sneeze at as a 'gratuity'. It could not be intentional, Bazanova could not remotely know when Natalina would hunt her down again. Not hours earlier than any deadline to keep the thief unmolested by the sabotage.

…she, yet again, had a slowly growing headache.

Of course, it was the thief sitting next to her with the dog peacefully snuggled up to her ass that caused it.

*How* did the woman *not* get bitch slapped for her general attitude hard enough to knock most of it off by now?

Obviously some of it could be attributed to her Dying Will Flame bullshit, but at a certain point people like them stopped caring about brutal death threats staring them in the face and started getting… *opinionated*. Not *everyone* was in on that mystical spirit fire and all the quirks they imposed, it should've been much likelier the woman had come afoul of someone with more money than sense to try fucking her over just for laughs without knowing what they were risking.

She wasn't *that* much younger than Natalina, Bazanova was what?

*Twenty?*

…entirely Renato's type, if she was going to be brutally honest. He had been *exactly* that type of infuriating competence matched with sheer breathtaking arrogance, if more of a general asshole painted over with a thin as hell veneer of genteel manners than this girl's entire judgmental noncompliance to social norms.

Sonya matched him better than she ever had. Natalina couldn't quite ever *forget* just who she was dealing with, not to be this utterly indifferent to the balances of power around her or involved in any one situation. In a different way, like Renato had tossed at her somewhat dismissively near the end of their relationship, she was a bit of a 'wet blanket' placed next to him and this woman.

Just simply because she was a touch more *sensible*.

God… keeping the thief *alive* for five-ten more years to raise that brat enough he wouldn't bitterly regret her loss was going to be a *chore*. If *Renato* couldn't survive with that kind of personal failing, this girl wouldn't be able to do it either, which meant she got to clean up the mess yet again.
"Right," eventually drawled Natalina's latest headache, glancing into the bowl of her pipe before slitting both herself and Fong one of their own each before raising up a knee in preparation to stand up, "I have shit to steal. If you two will excuse me…"

"Aa…" Their host cut his red eyes to the far bay windows, not exactly Chinese architecture but this building looked aged enough to have been here before the Triads moved in, and the Mafia Land agent attempting to figure out where to go past them. "…does any of us have outstanding contracts or concerns? I believe I do not…"

"I don't." They would have mentioned it when she got off her flight and reported the Spanish origin of the fake-Italian infiltrator.

"…oh. No, they're probably here for me." Bazanova admitted after a blank moment, her dog already on his paws and looking expectant well before the thief straight out bolted over the low tea table and to the door. With a bark-yelp of protest the canine darted off after her, not even glancing at the likely low-level Triad thug that idly propped the door open so the animal could follow his mistress to solve the likely lingering concerns after popping the head off an even faked Mafia agent.

"You are… not aware of many Dying Will Flame quirks, are you?" Inquired the man she had been left with, thankfully one that they shared an associate with so while probably awkward being left here alone wasn't personally dicey for her.

Yet.

"Not really, why?"

Fong lifted an arm, drawing his left hand out of his sleeve, and held up one finger. A spark of something very red and sizzling arced from his flesh into the hazy cloud of what was probably Bazanova's tobacco smoke left behind from more than that one half-bowl Natalina saw her consume.

The issue was that she was sitting in the middle of that ashy cloud that this man set on fire.

"Merely an observation." He cheerfully informed her, sliding his left hand back into his sleeves. "She showed me this trick, and while I do not know when she prefers to use it… I know she uses it to make a point if need be."

…so Bazanova was still charry of her. Unsurprising, more expected than anything really, but that Natalina didn't notice…

She glanced once at the thief's back, speaking to that Mafia agent she hadn't really expected to see without so much of a pause or hesitation due to being shot by a mole trying to start something with her death. Then back to the Triad tough, this time skeptically.

He merely smiled peacefully.

Was that a threat, or just a warning…?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 12th of September, 1970 continued. Morgue, Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Rasputin handed over the fleshless skull to his patron with a simple greeting of, "He was KGB."

Sonya blinked at him blankly, frozen stiff with one hand reached out to take possession of the bone
structure left over from being stripped of flesh. "…what."

"A KGB agent, leftover from the Cuban Missile Crisis from before we Soviets pulled out of it. A native convert, no he didn't know who you were but… his history probably gave him enough to guess with. You really were a target of opportunity." The mortician helpfully clarified further, dryly and with no small amount of black humor in his tone. "All he really knew was that you and I were Russian, likely a criminal if we were here, and that if nothing else he could help the Soviets clean up their undesirable elements while he did what he was hired to do. You stayed, I left, so he went after you once he could reach his gun."

She blinked slowly, glancing over her new skull soup bowl just needing a ceramic bowl set into the intracranial space to prevent leaks. The damage she made to the spine, crushing it between her own fingers, meant it had to be somewhat leveled using perhaps more ceramic or perhaps some metal wire to make up the difference between the wired shut jawbone and the only two surviving cervical bones.

"…okay then." Dropping the skull into a canvas carryall she brought with her to take possession of her latest human head remains in, the thief glanced back up pointedly. "Now, to your… complaints."

"Speaking of, do I send a report to the CEDEF about the true motives of this man or not?"

"…I'm thinking not, but you should send it on to someone. I'm about to go earn the hesitance and wariness I've been treated to by murdering a Mafia Land agent for no real reason for once. If you give them exactly what they were after, without making them pay for it somehow, they're never going to stop bothering you."

Rasputin glanced into the dark behind him to where the mortician's office actually was, where Rena was taking pangs to conscientiously allow him the opportunity to speak with his 'legal guardian' about his situation by doing up most of the paperwork they had to get done tonight, but it was really fucking likely the Brit was eavesdropping as a matter of fact. Trotsky wasn't ensuring the conversation eluded the other mortician he had been working with the past few weeks, it would be highly suspicious and for another would just make the other mortician more curious on what was going on.

They had probably about another fifteen minutes of grace yet, then the nightlife of Mafia Land would start flooding the morgue with the stupid and not-so-unfortunately deceased.

"Would it not help? My situation, I mean. Even if you do kill whoever."

"The point of brining you to Vongola's attention was more or less twofold. There is someone with significant power, more than me, who is aware of you and your abilities. That they are interested in acquiring you is annoying but expected. This means anyone else wishing to acquire you would have to avoid or bribe them off you first." Bazanova detailed for him, almost in a deadpan in return. "This opens up an avenue for you to expand your association base, because now no one can remove you for doing what you do without pissing off Vongola's CEDEF. So long as you ensure someone always knows where and who you are with, you don't have to stay down here all the damn time. The more that know what you can do with the dead now, the more security you have as long as you do it fast. So yes, it will help your situation… if the hospital becomes aware of your abilities. My advice? Charge through the nose for it and have iron-clad contracts for even asking one stupid little question of the dead. If Mafia Land can make money off you… you're secure. Beyond what any one human, another Flame user or not, could do alone or even with Vongola's numbers. Especially now they can't quietly remove you from being able to offer a service before anyone knows of it."

Edik eyed her skeptically. "So…?"
She blew out an aggravated sigh. "Inform Doctor Kappel, allow the possibility to pass it on to other doctors and key personnel. Let it spread from there, express skepticism for why you should've when they contact you about why you never told them what you can do with the dead. Highlight that the fresher the body the more you can do, refrain from making clear exactly how much you can retrieve from a severed head alone. But do make it clear you've been somewhat harassed for the ability and it's starting to interfere with your job already."

He frowned slightly, aiming his gaze at the ceiling where the greater bulk of hospital tasks were done overhead. "He's going to be rather annoyed with us, isn't he?"

"That was kind of unavoidable. Although, seeing as this isn't a health-related evasion, he shouldn't be that annoyed." Sonya shrugged that off, he caught the movement out of the corner of his eye as he looked back down at her, hefting her canvas bag with a skull in it to hang less awkwardly from her fingers. "Stick to mainly the facts, insist I said so, whatever might help you more. Go right the fuck ahead, you may as well make use of the terror my remote inclusion inspires."

Trotsky ghosted a warning past him, and instead of sounding it Rasputin merely hummed as the noise of someone dragging a body roughly down the employee stairwell leading to the rest of the hospital above became more and more distinct enough to draw Rena from the office.

As much as he might appreciate the offer, it was really the least she could do if she was going to immediately hurry off as she usually did after her rare visits to the island.

Klavdia finished dragging the deceased corpse of one of the hospital's administrative doctors down the stairwell by kicking the corpse down the last turn and the bottom of the stairs with frustration, ignoring the three pairs of eyes that locked onto her efforts skeptically, and once she had muscled the body onto a slab she turned to her legal guardian. "I want off this rock. It's boring."

His fellow mortician choked in the background, apparently not sharing that opinion and deciding this was more than enough involvement so she went right back to the evening paperwork.

Sonya neither looked very surprised nor very interested in why the other Sun was dragging dead bodies around. "Ever thought of moving to Italy?"

"What the hell is in Italy?"

"A Mafia Don I really dislike that wants someone to emigrate somewhere, and a master assassin that might want a torture specialist more than a medic for after." Clarified the thief, something distinctly colorful flicking across her usually grey eyes. "You might get to stop off in the United States for a little while, and please do call me beforehand so I can give you a few contact points to escape if you need to while you're there... but mainly I think you'll fit in more with a faction of assassins more than a hospital staff."

The rose-haired teen considered it, glancing backwards at the man she had likely murdered for some offense or another, then back to the woman invested with her safety. "...sure. Fuck, whatever. It has to be more interesting than this place."

"You didn't have to stay with the hospital once you got here, there's several guildhalls that would've let you contract with them."

"I wasn't trained for anything else. I'm not that fucking stupid, Bazanova."

The older woman sighed in response. "Right, whatever. Go bother Bjørn about a plane ticket, and if you could prevent pissing off Tyr the Sword Emperor I'd appreciate it. Before you go..."
"I'm not going to have to hear about whatever the fuck you did, right?"

Klavdia glanced at the body she dragged in one more time before apparently dismissing it entirely from any consequence. "Probably not, if so then whoops."

With that, the nurse turned on a low heel to stalk right back out of the morgue. Likely planning on packing her things and bailing entirely out of the exchange program with their guardian's permission, but to be frank Rasputin was only surprised it took her this long to wander off on them.

"…there's supposed to be a bunch of Lightnings around here too, right?" Questioned their legal guardian curiously, apparently also no longer interested in the dead body he now got to deal with in some way to avoid irritating either the other Sun or this woman with the consequences.

"They were shoved into supporting roles like janitors and equipment technicians at first, but they've eventually realized that they were basically discarded and have something of a hostile takeover planned for the research labs as soon as they figure out how to run it." Rasputin tattled shamelessly, rolling up his sleeves to start on the autopsy to see exactly what Klavdia did to the doctor and make an educated guess for what finally pissed her off too much. Women were kind of predictable like that, aiming for the dangly bits of anatomy if it was shoved where it was unwanted. Or practically any time, honestly… so maybe figuring it out would take more than a glance or two over the body. "Kappel's keeping track of them, and isn't warning the other doctors, so at least someone with oversight is watching that."

"Good. Don't get too occupied, I'll have another head for you in a few hours."

"You can raise the dead?" Rena inquired excitedly from the back office, apparently she hadn't been quite so removed from eavesdropping as he had assumed from the start. "Why the hell didn't you let us know? The fun we could've had, Rasputin!"

"Because some significantly powerful people tend to really dislike the mere implications." He deadpanned back, glancing over his latest practice dummy courtesy of Klavdia's last act as a Mafia Land nurse.

"Like that really fucking matters. Fuck them pricks." She emerged from the thankfully well-lit office cubicle into the less illuminated morgue workroom, draping herself across the temperature-controlled wall of cabinets they stored dead bodies in when there was a backlog or someone wanted to claim the remains. "So, now you've come out of the dark with your little necromancy… wanna get together with me and Ayat every now and again to place bets on what stupid shit someone did to get popped?"

"Of course you'd use it as an excuse to place bets." Rasputin dryly returned, cutting off the corpse's clothing to get at the flesh. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Because I have an unhealthy addiction to gambling. Obviously. But besides that-"

"Only if we can have something stronger than beer."

(Friday the 25th of September, 1970. Alexandria, Arab Republic of Egypt.)

Continuing the trend of contracts to date, the first three jobs Sonya got from Mafia Land were utterly boring. Soft easy one-offs, a hospital insertion and two civilian milk-runs she could fit in
the same general direction.

The point of starting with them was to knock the rust off her skills after several months back to back without doing anything criminally intensive, but it didn't make them all that interesting even if it was… well, not exactly required but at least smarter than heedlessly diving right back to where she had been.

Hence, Alek.

Her dog was nothing but a handicap right now, ill-trained and rather young yet. Sonya was utterly alright with that.

Alek required daily feedings and walks on a roughly-held schedule, he also needed just as much additional attention to keep from becoming bored and destructive with it. His requirements restricted the thief to a semi-predictable pattern and a schedule, her contracts then had to fit around his upkeep.

He made up for it by being a fuzzy fluff ball that loved her unconditionally and occasionally waking her up before her forgetting her bullet holes earned her more than an ounce or two of lost blood. He also was rather good at distracting all the attention she would've earned otherwise being places pedestrian tourists didn't necessarily go often.

With the hospital in Tunis, Alek spent fifteen minutes tethered to a park bench while she went through a visitor's door on the pretext of visiting someone. Sidestepping into an empty hallway then getting into the overhead fake tiled ceiling, she spent ten of those fifteen correctly filing the paperwork she had been tasked with inserting in the proper places and that was that job done.

While she had to steal Ottoman-esque fountain feature from one of the palaces in Benghazi, Alek spent time with her reconnoitering the area for guard patrols and what limitations the terrain would impose. Hilariously, she actually got to speak with some of the palace guards as quite a few came over to check her animal was adequately vaccinated and had his proper paperwork as they wandered close by.

Apparently the Pasha's family had various pets, and rabies was a big concern in those parts of Africa.

It let her figure out the best times and how to take the lawn feature wholesale rather than in pieces, the real target was the figurehead fountain part and not the basin it emptied various water spouts into. Either way, she carefully pried it up by sections and made away with the block of pure sandstone in the early morning while her dog safety slept in the hotel.

Simple, not particularly tricky, and utterly boring.

"I... am itchy." Sonya informed Alek pointedly, earning herself an adoring look and a half-hearted wag of a tail before he went back to blissfully snuggling into the hotel bedspread as she petted his velvety ears.

…that didn't really help her much.

Cherep was of the opinion he needed to wash his feet when he got to this point, she just… really didn't know what she wanted to do. To move would be nice, but that didn't cover whatever the hell was wrong with her now. Quite frankly, moving away from the castle and Moneglia had just made things worse… but she couldn't go back until she filled her quota for the year.

Aside itchy, which didn't help because it was annoying and persistently attention catching, her chest hurt. For good reason and all that, but the longer she went on bullshitting her brother's ability with being undead the worse the aches got.
...but that didn't really solve her problem right now either. A pair of aspirin and the ache was manageable, which still left her itchy and antsy.

Sonya sighed, slumped over her dog's fuzzy belly, and just gave up trying to think. She was just going in circles, and getting nowhere with it, so she might as well do something productive.

Alek decided she needed kisses, plastering doggy drool all over one side of her face and her neck with gleeful abandon.

Disgusted, she rolled back off the bedspread and glowered at her puppy. He popped up to his paws, wagging his butt almost hard enough to knock himself over and did a weird half-bow thing.

"Play?" She belatedly realized, recalling that habit from when he and Marco would playfight.

...yeah, actually. She wanted to have some fun too. These baby-contracts she had been doing since leaving Mafia Land was way too much like work, something she had to do for money but not necessarily what she wanted to do.

"I don't think you'd like waiting for me to finish drinking whatever thug under the table just for laughs, Alek." He cocked his fluffy white head to the side, not remotely understanding her point.

"And as I can't bar hop... I suppose that means I get to train you to steal shit with me."

Too bad there wasn't an acrobatic school for dogs.

"It's not going to help whatever's wrong. But it's different." She continued, pointlessly because canines couldn't talk back or really understand complex and emotional abstracts like how a completely different creature might feel at any one moment. "And different will at least be somewhat distracting. What job are we on? Something, something, lighthouse..."

Checking her paperwork, the thief hummed absently as she read over the required points. A bronze brazier or the glass lens of a 'suitably' old lighthouse. A bit open-ended, really, if it wasn't the requirement to steal from Egypt she probably could've hit up Greece instead...

...now, how to get Alek to help her beyond just being a convenient distraction/restriction?

(Tuesday the 29th of September, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Ruslana tiredly palmed her face. "Well, I believe that one is a non-starter."

Cesare delicately slid the French doors leading from the kitchen to the patio closed, even if that didn't remotely remove the blood-stained brickwork from her view. "And only the second one so far... I might just not move on for the fall at this rate."

Obtaining a butler-type while Bazanova was away was apparently going to be tricky. She considered maybe calling their lady's friend, the platinum blonde in Genoa, somewhat briefly but before she could reason out how to remotely phrase that conversation in her head Marco started excitedly barking from near the front of the castle.

The children were home, and there was still a body to deal with...

"Do you know what he was doing?"

"Ah... yes, the delightful Mirror Lady informed me of what she found investigating him. Trust me, no
one will be very surprised we disposed of a law enforcement snitch. As a matter of fact, I should probably spread the word there's moles in the 'usual' pools of service hands to hire from." Their chef-assassin discreetly cleaned those filleting knives he concealed in his sleeves before they could drip onto the black and white tiled floors, sliding them back away to wherever he kept them until he required their use again. "You could try that agency again… although I don't quite see a reason why as we won't get a new one until they complete their own independent investigation."

"The police, already?" She had thought Italy was different than the Soviet Union… perhaps not all that much?

The man made a slightly embarrassed sounding noise, attracting Ruslana's slightly wandering attention back on his still impeccably clean form. "Well… that is more my fault than any of you. I've worked in more than a few restaurants over the years, and killed a significant number of customers for reasons, my movements back in Italia's countryside attracted attention. He was after me."

"Oh… will you be alright?"

He scoffed rather rudely, looking mildly insulted now as he waltzed past her and on to minding the start of the day's dinner starting to boil on his stove with a quick stop at the sink to scrub his hands clean. "Please, covering this up will be child's play. They haven't yet been able to pin anything concrete to my name yet, this will not make much of a hitch in my stride."

She had to assume the Mafioso knew what he was doing, and he would be a better judge of if he was in any danger or not. "Do you think we should ask Lady Superbi for assistance? Without Sonya in residence, we are lacking some kind of leverage to enforce good behavior-"

"That should not matter." Cesare interrupted irritably, waving a spatula over a shoulder in lieu of turning around and risking something burning as he cranked the heat up under various pots and pans. "We might not be a formally recognized famiglia, mostly due to the Lovely Bossy Dragoness not bothering with a lot of the social aspects of starting and maintain a seat of power, but she deals with not only the Superbi but Vongola itself as an individual. There is no way no one realizes what we are… we are just having some phenomenally bad luck with hiring a new set of hands."

…they were a what?

Her son slid into the kitchen before she could ask, shooting the back-patio door a look which probably meant all the children were fully aware their only recently hired butler was now dead. "Mom? We're going to the third floor, the library, to get our homework done… do you need anything before we go try to puzzle out Italian syntax?"

"No dear, I think we can clean up the old-fashioned way." Ruslana informed him slightly tartly, but then again this was the second butler-type they had gone through to date. "We'll have the Mirror Lady plant the suggestion he left willingly enough due to… ah, some reason."

"Are you sure?" Usov asked, directly behind her.

Not able to prevent her nervous jolt, Zinaida's son never failed to startle her when he chose to simply appear somewhere he hadn't been until that moment, the greenette tried to give the middle Mist child a severe eyeing to prevent yet another repeat of this habit. "I believe I am very sure, young man. You have more important things to concern yourself with."

"Well, yeah… but school is boring."

"That may be, but it is more important you do well than pitch in around here when it isn't
necessary."

"Losing battle, there." Shamal offered on his way into the kitchen to join his fellow children, dragging his backpack behind him tiredly and ignoring the fact Marco was splayed out on top of it for a free ride around. "He's starting to not attend in person, and instead explore around school when class is going on."

"You're not suppose to tell them that, Shamal."

"Why not?" Inquired the youngest Mist, coming to a stop next to a mildly exasperated Larion. "It's not like they can force you to go, technically a part of you is attending... just not all of you."

"This is true..."

"Anyways." Specifically turning back to her, the tiny child frowned in a puzzled manner. "I was wondering..."

"No food in the library." Ruslana denied immediately, planting her hands on her hips and giving the son of her boss a pointed stare down. "If you would like a mid-afternoon snack, you must eat it either on the second floor or in the dining room."

Shamal batted wide brown eyes up at her. "That wasn't what I was going to ask, Mrs. Tolmachyova."

Uh huh, sure it wasn't. She was also a mother and knew full well how her son weaseled out of admitting to wanting something she denied him. Shamal wasn't quite so practiced at that evasion, probably due to how infrequently he could spend time with his mother-figure and not being denied much he asked of her. "Well then, what did you want to know?"

"Can we set up a chess game in the backyard?" The youngest Mist of the household made up on the spot, almost surprising himself with how much he actually wanted his alternative question. "The Mist-chess game, I mean. It's decently hidden from casual view, right?"

"...only if you have the Mirror Lady attending as oversight." Ruslana had to admit, she couldn't really see why not. Unless someone was specifically sitting out in open water with a telescope trained on the cliffside, their back acers should be difficult to spy upon. "And try not to get carried away, you do overpower her a little."

Then again, they were strangers in a strange land. It probably wasn't too farfetched to suspect someone might be spying upon them. Not to mention, a Flame user asking a non-Flame user for advice?

"I can probably do that..."

Usov hummed lowly, turning to his fellow. "You just want to up the scale in size? Or just see the action from up close?"

"And add more players. Any conflict really has more than just two sides, right?" Shamal made up on the spot, smirking slightly as the other boys got really interested in his suggestion. "We could help pry Verde out of his labs for dinner this way, with him and Scruffy as the 'mains' we can be rebels or secondary factions interfering with whatever they can come up with."

"I claim Master Yaozu's help." Larion claimed straight away, turning on a heel to likely ask the elderly man for his assistance in directing Constructed soldiers or rebels or what have you about an imaginary battlefield. "And Mingxia's, since you forgot her."
"I didn't forget!" Shamal protested hotly, chasing after her son quickly enough he abandoned his backpack and his dog. Marco immediately scooped up the abandoned canvas satchel into his jaw and chased after his boy, leaving Rulsana with the strangely silent Cesare and Usov in the kitchen.

The child, that sometimes was entirely not a childish young boy, then turned to her more seriously than before. "If you contact Mrs. Silvery-White, the odds are on us acquiring a Vongola Alliance spy for a butler."

"How is that worse than a police mole or a systematic liar who had no usable skills whatsoever?"

Usov shrugged that off indifferently. "Does it matter? A spy is a spy is a spy, although Anna might like someone to pick the mind of for tips... Sonya was not a fan of the idea at all when it was mentioned to her."

Ruslana sighed heavily, turning to the strangely still silent chef minding the food. "Cesare, what do you think?"

Putting the lid on a bubbling saucepan, the Mafioso turned around to face her but first cocked his head to the side. "Do you really want my advice?"

"...that is why I'm asking..."

Cesare then, strangely enough, glanced to the child. "Would she mind?"

"Hard to say... likely not. You'd be offering an opinion based on your native status, in the moment. We tried the other way and failed twice, in as little as one week. Even she couldn't say trying it yet again through the 'usual' way is what we should do next." Usov reasoned seriously, glancing past the Mafioso's solid form to the garden plot outside containing what she hoped was a hastily dug shallow grave to contain their current problem. "As long as she's aware, as are the rest of us, that whoever it is... is in fact a spy... it'll annoy her, for sure. At the very least, she'll shoot you a dirty look or two but not hold it against you."

"Additionally," Ruslana interjected when she got the general idea behind why the man was being so shy about giving his opinion, when before he almost never stopped giving it... as long as it was more personal than business now she thought about it, "I am asking, on her behalf as her head of household while she is off on business. As a Mafioso, and an Italian, what do you see as the best way forward in this situation? I might not use it, but I would like to know."

He inclined his head to her, acknowledging her point at least, and blew out a gusty sigh. "I theorize we should try the known compromised way. Reduces unexpected complications, and if the next one is not nearly as objectionable... you and the other adults could live with it comfortably for a short while with both Adrik and the Mirror Lady's watching his movements easily enough. It makes my skin itch, and I probably will not leave until the Lovely Bossy Dragoness has a chance to... interview whoever we get and decide herself, but it will attract less attention to us in the long run."

"I appreciate you staying past merely the summer Bazanova asked of you."

"Well." Cesare harrumphed with the air of smug satisfaction, turning back to minding dinner before it could burn. "I have a bit of a privileged position here, it is no hardship to reinforce it by doing what I would've done in the end anyways. I was brought on by Renato into your lady's retinue, with his death I always intended to keep closer than I would otherwise. Just in case."

...how was it 'privileged'?

Usov held up a faintly and darkly glowing hand, speaking behind it at a completely normal tone. "He
suspects Sonya's building herself a support base, and we'll turn into another criminal syndicate before long. Which might actually happen, depending if she really wants to ensure the entire surrounding countryside is more than safe enough for Shamal and the rest of us to wander about freely. That would make him one of the 'founding hands', and anyone that comes after would respect him a bit more because of it."

The Mafioso didn't even twitch or seemed remotely bothered by what the child was saying about him, which could either mean he didn't hear it because 'Mist' or that he honestly didn't remotely mind what was said behind his back.

Nervously smoothing her hands down the half-apron she had taken to wearing to protect her clothing, Ruslana decided that getting cold feet after moving half the world away when they asked it of her was rather ungracious of her. If Bazanova was going to build up some kind of protection racket, if only for the protection of the castle children… then that was good. Larion would enjoy a completely safe childhood, she and Afanasii would not be targeted due to either their son's special skills or their connections, and that was fine.

More than fine.

Usov gave her a slightly pitying look before disappearing from view.

It would be fine. She said so.
Chapter 28

(Thursday the 8th of October, 1970. A hotel, Abovyan, Kotayk Province, Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

Carefully peeling away the button-down blouse she wore today, Sonya eyed the bullet hole in her chest as it came into view through the tiny bathroom's vanity mirror. At least, she was eyeing the mirrored image of where a bullet hole should've been in her chest. One of two.

Hopefully there were exit wounds on her back, and she thought so because there was a part on her upper back that didn't feel alright… but she couldn't twist herself around enough to see them and be sure. That was where the lower injury not bothering her anymore became just as worrying as the upper one.

What she could see was that there was a coin sized patch of pure untouched skin about two or three centimeters below her collar bone on her left side, pale and almost translucent that stood out rather jarringly against the rest of her tanned skin. Except around the patch of faked skin itself, that was inflamed, angry looking, and a somewhat lopsided lurid purple and yellow ringed bruise. Sore not just to the touch, but whenever her shirt so much as shifted slightly over the site.

She considered her current issue with it, and eventually just peeled off the garment and her bra in hopes of preventing any further discomfort. Or at least as much as she could prevent it for the night.

With her shirt off, she could also see the lower gunshot wound just under her chest but still in her ribcage clearly. It didn't look much better, equally as angry and sore and an ugly bruise punctuated with a spotless patch in the middle as the top one, but strangely it also bothered her less than the other.

"Well… if it gets any worse, I'm giving up and going to see Tats." Glancing to the side, and down a fair bit, the thief blankly stared at her canine companion she had thought was noisily licking himself.

It was a thing, he was male. She didn't greatly care much, but…

He was instead lapping up the water in the toilet bowl, when he had a bowl of perfectly sanitary water available in the other room. Alek eventually realized she was staring at him, glancing up himself while licking the excess water off his chops.

"…and you lick me with that tongue." Sonya sneered, to absolutely no effect as he went back to getting himself a nice long drink of yet more toilet water when she didn't do anything too interesting in his opinion. "Whatever, don't expect to get away with putting that snout anywhere near my face tonight."

On her way to shove the discarded shirt into her luggage, Sonya thought back. Three year ago, when she and Cherep learned to surf. Then further back, and further to when they had been kids… surely… surely not, right?

Her brother didn't really like showing a whole lot of skin in public or tanning himself. Pasty white boy from the frozen north and all, generally happy as a clam in full sleeves and long pants. He would when it would be odd not to, meaning she had seen a bit of his stomach and the outside of his left thigh near his knee… and the nearly invisible tearing scars that went from just above one hip down to almost his knee cap. Then there were dots on his right arm, a lot of them of various sizes, that also didn't tan and looked perfectly healthy otherwise.
She glanced down at the two new splotches of perfectly pale flesh on her own chest worriedly. Ringed by an ugly bruise yes, but if it refused to tan back into her usual skin tone in the coming months…

Cherep had more of those markings she vaguely recalled on both hands, in fact most of the three fingers of his right didn't tan either paired with half of two on his left and a large patch on the back of the same. He generally ended up with a farmer's tan more often than a full body one like she and Tats tended to get, meaning those weren't too hard to spot.

Sonya had thought, with 'purple' not being a natural hair color she had been used to, that it was just something to do with Cherep's genetics to make whole patches of him not tan and gave that equally as blue as it was red tinge to his hair. She knew it happened, Michael Jackson was… would?

Was he still black now?

Would end up almost Caucasian-white due to a rare skin condition that severely and rapidly changed to color of his skin. If a Caucasian man ended up with the same condition… he'd just fail to tan, right?

The redhead Tatiana had freckles across her shoulders and back and was prone to burning instead of tanning if not enough care was given to protecting herself from the sun, Cherep just didn't tan in splotches and generally refrained from suntanning when given the opportunity.

It hadn't ever been something to ask, the pale patches had just been… part of him. Like how freckles were part of their elder sister or even herself and the small dark moles speckled on her thighs or her biceps and forearms. Like his hair and eye color, or that stupid attachment to the skull and crossbones motif he had, they just were.

She… didn't rightly recall what her brother's back looked like. In fact, she might've never seen his bare back before in all their time together. Which was odd, given they had shared accommodations on and off for years and went to the beach together a couple times when the circus was in range of one.

Cherep was always fully dressed when he left his room or the bathroom… except that one time after Woodstock. He had been shirtless then when they had replaced their clothing with something freshly bought, but she didn't recall seeing his back that morning nor paid much attention to him when she had an entire bed to spread out upon after stealing his shirt. He had gotten dressed last… and kept his back to a wall while de-tagging all the clothes. Because… well, the hotel room had been a little tight on space… right?

She didn't know what his feet looked like either, now she seriously thought about it. From the moment she met him up through living together as foster siblings, she didn't think she ever saw them or made note of anything off about his toes.

He always wore socks if not boots, even when it would seem uncomfortable to do so. Like napping with them on, or when all their socks were wet like back when they were attending Woodstock's final scheduled day. He had found them both some stupid rubber shoes marketed to protect the feet from sharp coral or shells in the sea while they were learning to surf… which had been protection equipment, so she had never questioned why he got them both a pair when their instructors hadn't bothered with any themselves.

This was all assuming she really hadn't seen his back and feet before, and they weren't just unremarkable enough to stick out in her mind now she suddenly had a couple pressing concerns about them.
She had a lot of questions about a minor and almost invisible feature of his skin she had never thought to question before now.

Why had she never asked?

Hopefully, her suspicions were just that and she was blowing a minor facet of in-progress 'Cloud Voodoo' up into an issue baselessly. That the markings she hazily dismissed as just part of her brother was in fact just weird genetically induced splotches of skin without enough or any melatonin and not stark 'Cloud Voodoo' scars.

Alek suddenly dragged a toilet-water wet tongue over the back of her knee, blinking his mismatched eyes up at her innocently when she wrenched herself away from him.

"Eww… no. No, don't do that." Urg, that was disgusting. "You're aiming for another bath, aren't you?"

He immediately fucked right off to his little bag of doggy toys stacked near the rest of their luggage, hunting through it and finding a bit of rawhide to chew on before shoving himself nearly half under the lone single chair in this room to go with the bed and bedside table. Flatly ignoring her now she said the dreaded 'bath' word, almost trying to snub her really.

"Yeah I thought not." With a shudder, and trying not to hyper focus on the wet patch of skin at the back of her knee, she pulled the rather battered phone closer to the side of the bed while she settled in for a possibly longer than normal conversation.

Punching in the stupidly long-winded series of numbers on a rotary phone was a bit of a pain, but eventually she found her way to the Mafia Land operators and got herself set to an extension in their guildhall's lines to wait on until Björn was paged about her calling. It didn't really take long, certainly not long enough to suggest a reason why her last contract asked her to get in contact with him this way instead of immediately sending her to another city in another country to do her next job.

"Dama, did you murder the head of the CEDEF before you left?"

"…maybe." Sonya allowed slowly, on a possibly compromised landline. "Why?"

There was a wordless sound, if pressed to identify it she would've pinned it as a mix of aggravation and outrage forced through a whistle. Odd. "Did you?"

"Hey, I warned him. Them. Whatever. They didn't stop bothering Rasputin, so I did what I said I would to Ganauche." Given she was the legal guardian for all those medical brats under any general age of consent in the civilized world, and mafia people were not the most trusting of people when it came to their various brats, none of that should be all that surprising. "Just because he's the head of whatever doesn't mean-"

"Dama, the HEAD OF SECURITY?"

"You could be the Dalai Lama for all I give a fuck, I will not tolerate anyone attempting to take advantage of my responsibilities. Besides, I gave a warning. Frankly, I'm just happy Ganauche wasn't there this time, or Tatiana might've murdered me for beheading her boy toy."

A loud thud made her yank the receiver away from her ear, and several subsequent thumps informed her Björn was still likely knocking his forehead against something solid without bothering to remove the phone from his.

…brat. Yes, she did it to him… but that didn't mean she wanted it done to her back.
Sonya put down the phone, dragging her purse over the entirely too big bed to dig out her second or third replacement pipe this month. She got most of the way through packing the bowl before her Lackey got his wits back together after trying to bash them out.

"Dama… Dama?"

"I'm still here."

"…please tell me the charge of thirteen hundred pounds in Cyprus wasn't you buying yet more books, and then the subsequent charge on the same account for airport fees wasn't you shipping yet more books with you."

"Excuse you, that's my money. I can buy whatever I want with it."

"…do you even have room for all that?"

"Of course I do, I have a fucking library now." She rolled her eyes at the third aggravated noise her Lackey had made in her direction since the conversation began, getting a bit tired of it. "They're all dog-training manuals or related literature, civilian sources so it'll all go directly to Italy once I've gotten what I need."

…mostly. There was something else in that pile that were not dog training or related material that cost the bulk of that sum. Supposedly, some fragments and most of a scroll of ancient origins that originated from the Alexandria Library through the Imperial Library of Constantinople then somehow ended up in a black market on Stoic Physics.

Sonya had no idea what 'Stoic Physics' were but was looking forward to finding out the next period of 'go here and wait for something' incident in her future. Like Verde's stupid scientist-thing.

Turkish would not be a particularly objectionable language to study next now she could at least read Greek, given there was a few things she wanted to investigate in the lands that spoke it… but she could do Classical Greek and Latin first before learning another modern language. Either or, more puzzles.

Odds were the scroll and related fragments were fakes, but the experience of finding out for herself would not be wasted given her intermittent hunt for the previous Arcobaleno generations through history. When she actually found something new. She got lucky with Carpentier's last words/memoir letter, it had been stored and preserved almost fantastically well for something no one had known was hidden in his childhood home. Odds that another such record in similar or better condition was waiting to be found was astronomically low, but that wouldn't stop her from looking.

"Got it all out of your system yet?"

"…yeah. Just… it's a little awkward when Nono Vongola asked for you by name for something his wife wishes." Björn grumbled irritably as he sorted himself out back to taking care of business instead of his… whatever the hell that had been. "While I was speaking to his representative, the results from reviewing the security tapes was passed along… just, give me a little warning next time Dama."

…Fiorella convinced her husband to help Aziz?

Or was it a term of her return to the Iron Fort?

Was it entirely divorced from that situation?
…she should call her mom and find out.

Well. Okay. She kind of saw his point now. "Okay. The next time I murder the head of the CEDEF I will ensure to make a point of giving you a little warning ahead of time."

…there was then a suspiciously long pause.

He blew out an aggravated sigh almost directly into her ear. "I suppose that will be the best I can hope for… on to business."

Finally.

"You finished with the."

"Yes." Sonya confirmed shortly, maybe still a bit irritated at her last contract.

Wherein which a syndicate asked for an independent thief to test their new security arrangement for 'important things', she showed up with dog and they stole the marked coin out of their shiny new vault as asked, and now they were really fucking pissy about it. Like, really fucking mad at her. Either way, she would definitely like to move on now.

She couldn't be arsed to figure out whatever the hell she did wrong, but her paperwork was marked off appropriately and it counted so fuck. Whatever.

Although Alek was getting pretty good with keeping up with her through very odd paths, he was always game to chase her into and through most anything… but they really did have to work on the 'quietly' part a bit more. He was probably going to end up with the fanciest paws of any dog ever, given even now his medium-short claws still clicked on certain flooring. She wasn't comfortable cutting his claws even shorter, so a lot of visits to a dog groomer's loomed in their future.

"You should be in Soviet Armenia, right?"

"Yes." She responded absently as she lit her pipe, watching the embers take before taking a draw.

"Ah, you will be collecting blackmail. On the Yeghvard Wine-Brandy Factory, before moving on."

Sonya considered that as she pulled the stem of the pipe out of her mouth. "What kind of blackmail?"

Bjørn hummed thoughtfully, from the sound of it rifling through a set of papers looking for the answer. "…doesn't say. Any kind of blackmail, then."

…that was actually really questionable. What she might find to be a damning or distasteful fact might not be to another of the same social-caste of whomever she was targeting, or those higher or lower. It was mainly by perspectives that something turned from just a fact to blackmail material.

To an American capitalist, the fact the Soviet Union established the factory might just be a damning fact they would be shunned for. To a good communist girl, that it was making booze and not yet more farming supplies should be somewhat dodgy. To an Armenian, maybe they might just find the sexual orientation or personal relationships the factory manager or whatever had to be seriously questionable. It varied a lot through the filter of public opinion, all relied on someone not wanting that information to get out in the first place to be blackmail material, and what she might think would work could be completely useless to whoever put in for this request.

Likely, Mafia Land wouldn't care much if the client got upset at being handed a whole lot of useless gossip. The fact she was hunting after blackmail on a factory in Soviet territory said a whole lot, and
mainly that whoever this was they were not a Soviet citizen.

Now, if she was hunting something on the factory dayshift foreman she’d be questioning how the workers managed to get a request through to Mafia Land in the first place.

For fuck’s sake, the factory could only be about three or so years old. There wasn’t enough time for something to become a hastily hidden skeleton in the entity’s closet. By the facts of the situation, she then was limited to hunting through the management team and whoever supplied/transported/sold the product on from here. Which very much might not be what…

"...isn’t this an info-broker assignment?" There were way too many variables, and it was a contract for information…

"Oddly enough, no. I thought so too, but the client specifically requested a thief only to take his job."

…sounded like someone knew there was something physical to steal but weren’t sure what, and whatever it was could be quite damning to those controlling the factory. Thus they wanted blackmail, but needed a thief to physically steal it instead of just get confirmation that it existed when they were already mostly sure about that.

Interesting.

Odd, really odd, but very interesting.

"Alright."

"You’ll take the job?"

Sonya snorted out a cloud of ashy smoke.

"Right, sorry. I’ll have the details sent the usual way." Her Lackey muttered, mainly to himself. Surprisingly not really annoyed her strict refusal to accept any contract sight unseen forced him to do these kinds of calls on really sketchy phone lines around the world and working with it rather well.

…did she give him raises, or did he just pay himself?

He hadn’t asked her for anything aside his mother’s jewelry, not for himself…

"...Bjorn, is there anything you want?" Aside her stopping her absent-minded abuse of his nature, because even if she now had more minions she shouldn’t keep mistreating her poor Lackey’s good intentions. "I mean in the near and far future, now I have you trained up for what I wanted from you."

She had to outright abandon this hotel room anyways, since they had an unsecured conversation about murder on this phone line. As a matter of fact, she might just fuck out a window with Alek and their luggage instead of checking out the proper way.

Leave people to wonder… once she changed her physical appearance a tiny bit.

Fuck. She needed doggy fur dyes, or animal-safe fur dyes. She could change her appearance from tiny and blonde to brunette and tall with just some dye and a pair of pump heels, but Alek was a white signal light from fifty paces away that would give away the illusion she was two different women.

Brilliant thing to realize in the outskirts of the Soviet Bloc and not in a capitalist trade port she had
ducked into and out of on her way out here. However, better late than never… especially before her canine's stupidly identifiable fur got her caught red-handed. Her dyes had to work then, and she had to babysit him so he didn't try licking it off his fur.

"…erm." Bjørn eventually offered on his behalf, making it very clear the teenager had never actually given thought to what to do with his life once she and her demands were satisfied. "No?"

"Well, think about it." She demanded, hanging up the phone and placing her half-burned pipe on the bedside table next to it. "Come on, Alek. Don't get comfortable."

Her canine companion raised his head curiously, a masticated strip of some previously dehydrated flesh hanging out of his jaws as he peered curiously in her direction. From under the safety of his lone sitting chair shield.

"No, I'm not just getting back at you for licking me with a toilet-tongue." Sonya had no idea why she kept talking to him, especially since half the time he didn't bother to respond appropriately. "We do need to go."

Of course, 'go' meant 'walk' to him so the dumbass immediately jumped to his paws and hunted around his toy bag for the leash they used for scouting out the area or just to walk him to heed the call of nature or tire him out for the night.

She took it, if only to keep him from getting underfoot and in the way trying to get her to hook his collar up.

Besides, he wasn't technically wrong. She would indeed be putting him on that in a few minutes. She just needed to change her clothes and hair color first… and give him some splotches of brown in his pale fur. Like all over his back to make him more 'collie' looking.

Bath time again, and now he was going to escort her to the bathroom under the mistaken impression that she was just doing human things to assemble herself to go outside again and walk him.

Lovely how that worked out.

(Wednesday the 14th of October, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

"We might need some naval forces." Shamal observed critically to Verde, eyeing the rising but totally Constructed 'surf' now lapping at their heels. It being at their heels meant it was about waist high for their Constructed forces trying not to get sucked into the equally faked mud underfoot.

Most of their forces right now were land-based with bronze era weaponry, but if the artificial surf created for the night's game rose any more most would then need to either swim with their heavy and mostly bronze equipment or ditch some or all of it.

The youngest Mist in the tri-faceted game considered it more. Well… they either needed to learn to swim or go airborne.

The scientist technically directing the pieces he Constructed into existence grumbled irritably, nothing Shamal could make out but half-mangled words in one or two languages he didn't know. Flicking his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, the older man inspected what he could see of both old man Yaozu and Hawk who was directing the other two sides.

"The initial thrust was wasted upon Hawk's forces, we shall be relatively unscathed." Verde
eventually decided, taking stock of where all their units ended up after the Mirror Lady busted the
dam she had previously built in an earlier turn.

He had a point, that sudden flood *did* take out a third of Hawk's and Usov's archers trying to position
themselves to fire arrows down into the glade Yaozu had his 'king' piece within. Banishing the
archers back with a wall of pure lake water meant there was a full-out mudslide going on over there
on the 'lowland marshes', from what he could see through the mist now rising off the water baking
off into its old constraints. His and Verde's pieces got pushed around and disordered too... but they
only lost three individual pieces when a few of the Constructed trees got uprooted and smashed into
their rangers.

Pulling at the air around them, Shamal made a cone of complete silence to keep the other two Mists
from eavesdropping on them 'accidentally' rather than specifically if they had the right pieces to do it
through. "If we're going to assume Anna doesn't want to add more to this. She could, if she built
more dams in other areas. We haven't been able to keep track of her and Master Yaozu's last six
turns."

"...regretfully true." The Lightning critically took stock of what they had been left with after the
Mirror Lady's artificial 'act of God', and he made their Constructed Roman soldiers mime brushing
themselves off and digging out the supply wagons from the muck left behind the water surge instead
of stand there like manikins. Against Anna's and Yaozu's Chinese Imperial soldiers, and Usov's and
Hawk's Celtic Britons... they were now pretty much on top in terms of manpower strength.
"Although, it should not be possible within the bounds of the rules. We only had the 'waterfall' in the
mountain range border on her side, and I seemed to have missed studying the period of Chinese
history where they learned to harness waterfalls into labyrinths of aqueducts."

"You know, that's just like daring us to find a way."

Verde reached over and lightly swatted Shamal upside the head, probably for being a little smartass.

Snickering, and with half his attention focused on Usov and whatever he was doing under Hawk's
direction for their turn to report once something actually happened, he admitted half-jumped out of
his skin when someone with not enough force but more than enough finesse smacked full into the
Mirror Lady's precautions laced about just so to miss a lot of the really nasty stuff. The weirdly
shattering bell sound had Anna completely abandoning the game, which he couldn't hold up even
with Usov's help since she was *so much better* at natural-looking Constructions like half their damn
game board was made up from.

The three armies he was mostly supplying with dictation on how they looked from the others, any
sense of force distribution balance and the half-scaled physics that Usov was minding, the
Constructed and mostly pint-sized world for them to fight in Anna had been responsible for with the
environmental factors already at play all faded into Mist Flames a tiny bit lopsidedly from where the
younger two Mists tried to shore up the interwoven Constructions but failed.

"Do not move." Anna advised the newly revealed Mingxia shortly, not even glancing at the young
Rain behind her who had taken two steps to the side to put herself in reach of Master Yaozu.
"There's another Mist here."

"Who smacked right into your protections face first." Usov remarked dryly, but he also had a hand
held out to keep Hawk from advancing forward to meet their interloper since it was difficult to 'face
off' with a Mist user in the first place. "Not a very smart one."

Shamal was about to correct that, they couldn't assume stupidity when hasty overreactions could really
explain the same thing, but Verde sharply dug a hand into the collar of his shirt and hauled him
into the air with a massive pull. It kept him outside the reach of something shadowy and grasping that passed under the tip of his old loafers by a bare smidge of distance, and he couldn't quite help himself from gripping the scientist's wrists with a yelp as he pulled himself even further out of reach.

Anna yanked on both his own and Usov's Flames to fight off whatever attempted to snatch at her and Mingxia, but Hawk utilized a burning pulse of Storm Flames to keep Usov and himself safe so they both could lend her the power to solve her problem. Larion got pulled outside and dumped on the Storm as the best equipped to handle a hostile Mist just to be safe, and tugging politely first to make up for the instant demand she had to do before the Mirror Lady started lacing something together with her Pavuchky and that borrowed power.

Suddenly forced back into the material world to avoid the hunting orb weaver trying to hurt her, the pink haired young woman wearing some kind of mask over her eyes simply wove a sheet of cloth made from rock to protect her from the oversized spider and foul the lunge it made for her face. She attempted to smack the bundled spider back into the earth harshly to crack into Pavuchky's chitin and hurt him, but had to abandon trying to murder the Mirror Lady's pet due to three or five copies of the same spider lunging up from the ground and sinking their fangs into her legs.

It was tricky to count the spiders, they had a lot of legs and wouldn't hold still enough to prevent the wild colored stripes on them from bleeding into an entirely different copy.

"Shamal," Verde spoke lowly, drawing them both slowly away from the ongoing spider-hunt and Anna got more and more outraged at the newcomer's utter gall at not giving up in the face of a pissed off spider and multiplied her pet to match, "is that young woman... really a young woman?"

"...no." He belatedly realized, critically examining the faint after-image thing around the back and elbows of the other Mist.

It was pretty hard to watch how one's own back moved or flexed, it was easier to watch someone else's... but that meant you didn't really know how your own muscles contracted and lifted certain parts of the body. It never matched up right, not when you were wearing a physical form not similar to your own. Especially when you went with a gender you weren't, unless you were like Viper and refused the slightly different builds between male and females for a streamlined one in-between both. A mainly Mist-only issue, but an issue he had gotten caught by before.

The scientist hesitated as he considered that answer, probably not sure what use to put that information to, but Shamal wiggled out of the grip the older man had on him. While he really appreciated the loan of Lightning Flames to make him practically invulnerable as much as a non-Lightning could become comfortably, he had instructions from his godmother to obey.

Usov gave him a helping hand to traverse the mountain range in a blink, giving him a spot to aim at as well since he had been there before and put a marker on the nearby road. Master Tyr was in the middle of distractedly tending to a construction plan laid out neatly on a folding card table, along with a large number of CEDEF construction workers swanning about the very destroyed clearing and several large construction machines.

The master assassin was not happy to see Shamal given the thunderous scowl, but he also didn't throw him out on an ear upon sighting him or otherwise verbally chase him off... which gave him an opening. "There's a weird pink-haired lady attacking us, but she's not herself."

There was only a slight hitch in the man's stride to indicate he heard him at all, as he advanced on his arrival point. Shamal found himself held still from any fidgeting by a strong and firm grip on the back of his neck. "Take me there."
His Flames reached back through the same way he got to a clearing on the other side of the mountain side, caught Usov's helping hand unerringly, and pulled them both through the Constructed instant-path back to the castle's backyard. Just in time for a flaming Pavuchky to go flying past right in front of Tyr's nose.

The assassin pushed him back somewhat roughly, but he forgave that because the man reached up to the back of his own neck and pulled a sword from under his suit jacket to slice off the intruder girl's entire left hand while she was too busy redirecting the Disintegrating clumps of dirt thrown in her direction.

Tyr had to have a Mist Guardian. There was no way he could conceal and whip out a longsword set next to or on his spine without a judicious helping of Mist Flames to prevent accidents or anyone from noticing. That kind of sucked…

Anyways, the removal of a hand had their intruder hesitating and on the verge of panicking. It let three Pavuchky tackle her to the ground and Verde to drop probably more voltage than recommended for human survival on top of everything, popping the Constructed spiders but firmly knocking out the puppeted girl and probably knocking out the Mist-ghost overshadowing her.

An almost physical glass breaking sound heralded the Mirror Lady's full return to physical space with another of her spider copies protectively perched on a shoulder almost like a lopsided pauldron, dark blue eyes already narrow and very suspicious until all three Mists agreed the girl was down and no longer a threat.

Shamal kind of agreed with her, that had been a… tiny bit familiar.

Like he had seen that Mist before…

Anna glanced over and reviewed that information with him for a moment adding what she knew as the one pulled into the aftermath to help Igor regain himself, pursed her lips and turned to the master assassin sliding a cleaning cloth over his sword in preparation to return it to the spinal sheath.

"Master Tyr, I see young Shamal has found you in good health."

The assassin's mouth curled upward, and he inclined his head to her in the same motion he sheathed his sword. "In fine form, Mirror Lady. I trust you all are well?"

"Well, now." She observed tartly, sweeping a hand around the yard and putting it all to rights as well as getting everyone not needed out of the yard. "Our thanks for your prompt response, Sword Emperor."

Her actions just left Shamal, Usov, Verde strangely, and Hawk with the slightly borrowed Sky, their attacker, and Adrik who was somewhat painfully staggering out of the castle's kitchen door with the implements to at least physically restrain their prisoner now the excitement he couldn't physically take was over.

A crackle and pop of static electricity tinged with something dark discharging from Verde's fingers kind of explained why Anna's Flames didn't affect the Lightning, but on second thought he was kind of necessary to keep the now one-handed girl restrained so maybe she didn't even try.

…it kind of hoped they could reattach her hand. It wasn't like she had intentionally attacked them, someone used her for it. She shouldn't lose a whole hand because someone else was a butt-head.

"She's dressed as a member of the Cervello Organization." Tyr informed them all in a tone pitched to carry without needing him to raise his volume, folding his arms behind him as Verde and Adrik
got her as secured as they were going to. Pavuchky weighed into the issue, affixing Flame-resistant spider silk from the girl to the rope and even going as far as reattaching the invading Mist girl's hand using some of his natural spider-glue. "Directly south of Genoa is a French island Corsica, which is also directly north of the Cavallone's Sardinia, and where she is probably headquartered with her syndicate."

"She was puppeted in a method we recognize. Herself, and her limb, will be returned as promptly as we may once the formalities are handled." Anna accepted on their behalf gracefully, curtsying to the Sword Emperor deeply. "Without further consequences."

His head cocked to the side, refocusing on Shamal instead of their temporary spokeswoman. "Truly?"

He scowled, mainly because of who he was remembering more than who was asking or the topic. "It's kind of like how Igor got 'overshadowed', and I recognize that... uh... Mist-tint."

Kind of like one's handwriting, but a physical feel instead of a visual sight. Viper had one so complex it was very nearly invisible, Anna's was glassy-smooth and elegant, Usov's was kind of like injecting sugar into your bloodstream, and Croquant Bouche's was just spice incarnate. You could mimic another's 'taste-feel', but it never came out right and most Mists could tell at a moment's inspection that was not saying who was supposed to be there.

Master Tyr probably did hear all about the situation after the fact, and that he had something to do with how his godparents caught on to the nasty Mist trying to hide in the Russian Mist's very being. He supposed he was the best familiar with that one, although if this one was the same it wasn't... they couldn't assume that.

It was still just a 'maybe'.

"...very interesting." Decided the Soft Flame Sky, mostly to himself but Shamal heard it with being next to the man's leg and all but he didn't seem to care he caught it when he glanced downward. "You will be informing your mother?"

"Of course." Like mamma would be pleased to hear it from someone else well after the fact. She liked her details prompt and concise, not telling her would make her Stormier than Cloudy when she got back.

Her being Stormier wasn't much fun. She got prickly.

Tyr then turned to Verde, who was not best happy to be involved with someone he had previously opted to avoid from the look on his face. "And you are?"

Anna handled the introductions, using only the scientist's nickname instead of his real one and naming him 'Sonya's scientific pawn' instead of a researcher in his own right. Verde was obviously unsettled, if just from the pink-haired girl attacking him or the return of the master assassin was questionable... but his Flames went jagged and just started screaming 'NOT' all of a sudden.

It was pretty distracting.

Weirdly, it seemed Tyr could hear that in some manner just as well as the Mists could but Adrik couldn't. Before the Mirror Lady could even contemplate frowning at him, the assassin had taken two full steps backwards and shifted his attention to distracting Adrik from realizing anything with asking how he intended on letting the Cervello Organization know what happened to one of their assumed public agents.
Scruffy stepped outside, flinched, went right back inside only to nearly walk into Galina and Larion. He edged around her and the Rain to hide himself inside and probably speak to Yaozu since Mingxia was now in the kitchen behind them all so that meant the old man had to be there too.

Anna sent everyone to their rooms?

They had to have been to pick up the lady Lightning on their way back down. She had claimed to be too busy getting the final edits for her godmother's second civilian-friendly Dying Will Flame handbook finished after dinner to join the game-night event. Two floors higher and some thick castle walls between her room and the backyard meant she couldn't have heard the Mirror Lady's audible warning sounds of a breach. Mingxia and old man Yaozu lived further past her on the third floor and could have run into her… but who got McScruffy out of his room?

That was pretty funny, actually. He kind of hoped she thought to catch everyone's expressions as they realized it…

"I wonder if your boss is going to count this?" McCarthy asked idly from behind Hawk, who either had to have been out on the grounds tonight or heard the glass-themed sounds to investigate from the ground floor. In order to sneak around most everyone else piled up in the back-kitchen entrance and end up behind Hawk as he currently was.

Shamal hadn't noticed him, but Usov had and hadn't stopped pooling information with him and Anna so they had been fully aware he was creeping around still until Verde's flight out tonight.

To be frank, his attention span was wandering all over the place now the exciting bits were done. Realizing that while keeping track of seven different things was kind of both interesting and boring.

Then again, they were Mists. Making the fantastic boring through overexposure in a word, and without something new to focus upon he kept getting snagged by almost random thoughts.

Anna was not a fan of that habit of his but if he was aware of it, she wouldn't nitpick at him to solve that problem before nature did. Usov gave the outsider a creepy grin to keep him mostly silent while Tyr expounded on the aid that was probably going to cost his godmother dearly later, but at least he wouldn't make them look bad and express his glee at the 'more exciting' trouble someone was about to have.

He blinked, and sort of loosely let go of the Russian sync knot between all three of them. Shamal noticed a hell of a lot less when he didn't have access to Pavuchky's multiple eyes for a wider field of vision or either of the others' insights to the non-Mists they lived with… but it was easier to focus on himself without the other two lurking in the back of his head pointing different things out.

As for himself, his neck hurt. Like, a lot.

Both Verde and Tyr grabbed him around there, one shoved him around, and ow it kind of hurt in a small way. Rubbing at his abused throat, he almost wandered off to get something cold and soothing to drink when something frilly-feeling but not real smacked him upside the head yet again.

Anna. Reminding him that since he brought him, he had to take Master Tyr back. Since forcing a change without clearing it with the man they were imposing upon to help them with some small logistical issues would be rude until he was done with the subject he was currently on… and she had opinions on rudeness.

Feeling a bit put out, but not enough to argue with the Mirror Lady about it, Shamal stayed put with a put-upon sigh to express himself.
The 'adults' were going to take forever with discussing things and agreeing his mamma owed Master Tyr a favor or at least payment for this consultation. Their game was ruined, no one thought to keep a record to smooth them all past an interruption like this and the mood to play was well and truly dead now. Furthermore, he couldn't wander off under any pretext until he took care of his own guest.

Great…

(Friday the 16th of October, 1970. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Verde regarded the speaker somewhat cynically over his appreciatively chilled bottle of local beer. "That is based on several assumptions. Primarily, that there are in fact several worlds we cannot observe nor otherwise interact with. No proof is provided to reason that there are such. They are merely proposed to be."

"Yet." Chipped in one of the others, who he rather ambiguously recalled had been announced to him as a mathematician with a lateral interest in calculating meteorology information nursing the glass of some dark red wine. 'Although I agree with the premise you've proposed, there are other worlds. We just call them things like 'Mars' or 'the moon'. Therefore the statement 'the world is covered in mostly water' would only prove true for this world of Earth and not at least one or two others we do know of. However, I would like to point out that the constants of the universe we observe on our own world could not significantly change on another for them to be considered constants in the first place. Therefore, your argument should be provable here and not just a theoretical 'somewhere else'."

"And that's also an assumption." Their original speaker countered dryly with a somewhat wild gesticulation to punctuate his argument. "We have yet to test such things and gained repeatable results in all corners of this galaxy or any others, meaning you cannot say with certainty that there are constants of the universe instead of universal constants of life on Earth or an Earth-like world."

Their astrophysics fellow puzzled that over for a few long seconds but couldn't counter that logic offhand and eventually gave up his tangent to drink from his glass instead.

"Similarly," Verde did it for him, "you cannot assume the constants will alter short of a hypothesis to base such on and give an uncertain quality to earlier conventional proofs. Else it would be the equivalence of stating the dinosaurs will return to life exclusively through the process of evolution… possible, but rather improbable naturally and therefore assumedly false until proven otherwise. Furthermore, similar in such an argument as in Maxwell's demon thought experiment, 'demonic' and 'Godlike' are merely terms. We, or more to the point someone in the near or far future, may use them to label purely terrestrial components or effects of true particles on another substance or under the effects of additional elements… but they would be merely that. Labels. Which then would compromise the thought experiment and malign the foundation of 'Godlike' being a provable quality that would or could prove God truly exists."

"Then, you'd have to quantify what God. There's a number of 'God' or 'God-like' entities in human theology alone, which one would you prove true?"

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle?

He glanced over and blinked, a bit nonplussed by what he found when he finally took his attention away from his fellow scientists towards the side entrance to the hotel's barroom.
Sonya was now a chestnut hued brunette propping a side door open on a shoulder as she jigged with a leash, but also Alek had the somewhat rough markings of a husky staining his formerly pale white or off-white fur in a similar tone of brown near to her... high heeled feet. As the woman was also unlimbered from any luggage and held a glass of something amber and probably whisky in hand, he could also assume she had been present for longer than just enough to overhear the conversation.

"Also, Maxwell's demon? You couldn't think of anything else?"

"As I am woefully unequipped, and rather disinterested in, theological debates... Maxwell's demon is as close to divine providence or trying to prove divine presences in either direction I wish to encroach." Verde defended his choice of deliberation elements, only a bit embarrassedly as he resolved his idea of Sonya as an educated individual to include 'all but the paper for a master's degree' she had previously informed him she had.

Diplomatic in nature or not, her instructors had been very thorough to include a grounding in scientific theories to include at least the basics of high-level paradoxes in her education.

"You could make a case for Schrödinger's cat to help define what is and what is not something we can reliably observe at one time to make any assumptions of." His smartly attired boss in the dark blue pencil skirt and suit jacket paired with those high heels pointed out before leaving her rather greatly discolored canine companion tethered outside to fully join the group lingering near the hotel's ground level full bar.

"That would be taking the easy way out of the argument, as well as fail to fully address the possibility of the proposed existence of a Godlike variable as something we can or will eventually be able to measure in some real way."

"Schrödinger's cat and the observer's paradox is cheating, but bringing Maxwell's theorem for violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics involving an imagined tiny devil into an argument about proving the nature of Godlike values isn't?" Pausing to take a sip of her drink, the woman shook her head and rather purposely slid closer to him than socially acceptable for a casual setting. "Sure dear, whatever you say."

Very nearly dropping his beer bottle when she slid an arm behind him rather familiarly, he then nearly poured it out onto the carpet underfoot when she rose up to her tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek. It took a somewhat vicious pinch to his back to keep him from reacting poorly or just outright giving away this falsehood to the men he had been debating with before her arrival, and the woman's very pointed look as she pulled back reminded him not to gape as if he was unused to her antics when that was the truth.

It took him almost embarrassingly long to figure out how to progress the conversation with her inclusion, and eventually ended up dredging up a topic she had already refuted previously even if that excluded the others somewhat. "...are you sure you are not going to be bored?"

"I found a supposed scroll from the Library of Alexandria, proving it as a fake should take some hours of study." Elegantly shrugging that concern off, the formerly blonde thief glanced to the side at the individual he had been debating before he became rather silent in her presence. Turning back to him instead of comment to one of Verde's old school mates, she gave a slightly off smile that spoke volumes to the worsening social silence at her arrival. "I would like to speak with you for a little bit, about what happened at home before you all run off to whatever is today. My godson didn't exactly pay attention to the smaller details at the time, the little brat."

"He is what? Six?"
"Seven."

"He did leave to go fetch our neighbor the moment he realized the severity of the issue." Verde allowed in defense of his game-night partner, aimlessly given the woman did not remotely seem too annoyed at the child's understandably short attention span after an occurrence that could possibly be described as 'exciting'. "Although… I believe you would like to know his opinion, then?"

"Not just that, although I will not say no to a more concise and less 'manners' related report on that."

"Verninac, do you mind introducing us to your lovely companion?" Interjected another who had been observing instead of joining the debate before this, likely sensing something amiss and wishing to smooth it over as a senior attendee might. He was slightly older than the few of them that gathered to take advantage of the hotel's open bar for the gathered scientific experts and got to debating newer thought experiments with contrived limitations but had seemed to enjoy simply listening in instead of participating.

…Verde had to admit, he didn't know his name. He didn't recognize either of the others he had helped in the conversation either, therefore he wasn't the best equipped to do any introductions.

"Sonya de Mort, historian." Claimed the woman nearly welded to his side, a tiny nudge of her hip against his that nearly unbalanced him had him grabbing her opposite one on reflex simply to steady himself instead of fall over her. The action somehow wasn't surprising or noticeable to anyone else, even if he found it acutely awkward and highly irregular. "My apologies for interrupting, but I do need to steal Gilles for a moment or three."

"…any relation to-"

"Skull de Mort is my brother, yes." She cut the one to originally propose the debate topic to the group off a bit tiredly, nodding once to acknowledge the slightly sheepish grin she was given for the response. "He's on tour, they might hit up France before the end of the year but I don't know what route they're taking nor when it might be."

Was her brother famous?

…did he meet the man?

Verde honestly could not muster up any idea of what her brother might look like, nor a name before she announced it, so he somewhat doubted he had been introduced to him. He was rather terrible at recalling individuals he either only just met or had not seen in some significant measure of time, in truth…

With a cough, his belatedly recalled old school mate reached out a hand. "Alaine Dupuis, aspiring physicist and general entomology busybody."

After switching which hand held her glass without allowing him the leeway to move away from her, Sonya obligingly reached out her own but there was a moment of physical cessation before Dupuis could turn it over to mime a kiss on the back of it.

"…strong hands you have there."

"A misspent girlhood in the Russian circus. Acrobatics and tightrope walking require it. Not to mention the knife throwing." With a slightly stiffening smile, she then turned somewhat expectantly to their rather unknown astrophysics inclined mathematician who had contributed to his preceding debate with the others. "And you?"
"Dione Lanthier." He volunteered a touch curtly, but then again she had interrupted the deliberation and he could see how that might annoy someone more interested in it than he was so his refraining from shaking the woman's hand wasn't too astounding. "Nice to meet you."

"Jean-André Bisset." Brightly announced the older man that had been observing instead of participating before she could respond properly to the second greeting, taking advantage of the other man's disinclination to give Sonya's hand a hearty pump or three by doing it himself. "What is a lovely lady like you doing with all us sticks in the mud?"

"Again, stealing Gilles. Do forgive me." Her stiff and polite smile changed into something completely insincere, at least it seemed so in his view, which aligned with her starting to physically if surprisingly gently push Verde away from the small group. "I'll return him completely unmarked in a few minutes."

For reasons best left unspeculated upon, that claim greatly amused their senior fellow. Lanthier merely snorted, which was less galling than Dupuis' rather toothy grin and flippant wave at her announcement.

"...Verde, where are your bodyguards?" Sonya very quietly snarled as she still gently but firmly removed him from the hotel's handsomely appointed barroom and into the more sedately arranged lobby on a general trajectory for the staircases. Worse yet, she discarded her own glass of amber liquid and his beer bottle in a convenient planter containing a heartily growing _crassula ovata_ instead of allow him to down the remainder. "Further fucking more, why aren't you within reach or sight of them?"

"In the public level of a common room, with witnesses about?"

"That's exactly the kind of opening an assassin would like." She rather bitterly spat back, finally releasing him once they had at least one flight of stairs between them and his fellows. "Stabbing someone in the gut with a concealed knife then just walking off or staying to 'help' and ensure someone's dead is a staple of assassination work. Yes, you can be entirely un-stabby if you wish... only if you KNOW it's coming."

He frowned at her back for the conflicting threats he was supposedly under. "I believed your previous claim on the motivations on this event was my kidnapping or forcible recruitment -"

"In the worst case, depriving someone else of an asset you can't get a grip on is entirely a valid tactic for those like me. We're all that fucking petty." She shot him a unexpectedly understanding expression over a smartly attired shoulder, before returning to puzzling out the number attached to a brass key in her hands. "I know it's annoying, and in the way, and entirely an imposition. Let it happen anyways. Worse comes to worse they'll just be totally useless."

…wasn't that his room key and number…?

Verde checked the pocket of one of his better pairs of slacks quickly, coming up with pocket lint and not the hotel room key he had been more than certain he had placed there before leaving his rented room.

She must have pickpocketed him. Brazenly. In a group containing at least four individuals paying her specific attention, any number of others on the outskirts that had not joined in at all with the debate or with getting an introduction, and the staff of the bar itself idly watching to ensure no one got drunk or aggressively out of hand.

_How?_
Eating up the space that had opened between them with his longer legs, once he realized it was there after he validated his suspicions on what that item in her hands was, Verde caught the woman sliding the key into his hotel room's door and effortlessly opening it without issue.

"Sonya." Even more gallingly, he was pretty sure he had seen that luggage set under a window before when presenting this thief with the glass armor scales she was sliding off with her suit jacket. She likely found his room independently, off-loaded her things without issue, and then went looking for him. All events he had been somewhat sure would not be possible with the level of security and professionalism the hotel's staff had exhibited in the short few hours he had been a guest. "...do you intend to move in here with me for the duration of the summit?"

"Yes." Something close to a grimace crossed her face, kicking off the inch-high heels and taking a few more ginger steps to the hotel room's provided desk containing her purse and some other accoutrements women seemed to prefer over a simple wallet and two-three pockets of necessities. "It's easier to protect you if someone is physically with you, and I can pull it off better than Hawk or what's his face could without possibly damaging your reputation among stuffy and overly opinionated old-timers. Speaking of... where are they?"

"McCarthy? Across the hall with Hawk in what is a double occupancy room with the aim of 'to get sorted', I specifically failed to ask how he managed that arrangement as well as what his intent was in 'sorting'." He was mostly focusing on how to argue her out of the room without issue, and worse yet failing, to realize what he said until after her bark of surprised laughter. "That wasn't what I meant."

"I'm using it anyways. Once he pisses me off." Given she was making herself comfortable on his bed with little apparent interest in moving anywhere else, Verde had the sinking suspicion he wasn't going to go the long-weekend without a rather shapely bed partner. "I still need what Tyr said from you, and I'll get Hawk's opinion on it too here in a bit. However... you probably have reservations and concerns about this. Right?"

Astute of her. "Sonya... I do not think I can reliably sustain the illusion of a relationship--"

"And I'm honestly sorry. I know it's making you uncomfortable." She lifted both shoulders, but annoyingly enough did not remotely seemed deterred from anything she had estimated important enough to construct a false rumor in the protection of. "Specifically, I hate my imposition is making you uncomfortable. If I could get away with standing the appropriate distance from you for casual business acquaintances I would, however... it will not help. You or me. The fact of the matter is that Hawk and whatever his name was can be excluded from your egg-head shindig on the basis of 'classified materials'. So can I, but as a girlfriend I can at least reliably pull you out of situations we find to be too chancy or provide an easily understandable excuse for why you missed whatever meeting or lecture or what have you."

Feeling the slight tinge of his building frustration starting to eat away at him, Verde spent precious seconds in the natural pause of human speech patterns trying to calculate some method or possibility that could be utilized instead of the ruse... "Why could we not make it clear to the organizers the shady background of my invitation?"

"For one, you need that invitation and more in the future. You're brilliant, honestly. That brilliance could be put to phenomenal use, just because I have hired you first doesn't mean I'm disinterested in what else you could come up with given the right connections or specialists in different fields. Secondly, because that will not solve anything." She ran a few short-nailed fingers through her distractingly russet-brown hair, idly scratching at the back of her neck before dropping her arm. "We need to make a statement with your attendance, tipping our hand by admitting we know they're out
there by informing anyone is not it. It's not just whoever's trying this you need to warn off, it's anyone else in the future that will think 'why not catch him out and alone when he's mingling with simple civilians?' We need you to be untouchable and too hard to get to even at a last-minute circus like this, which includes preparing for the inevitable lashing out when they're stumped a time too many to be reasonable anymore, so as not to put your fellow scientists at risk too if you ever wish to attend another of these events."

...future-proofing?

If he did not require another close habitation with his boss on such occasions, Verde might be able to endure this once. Gratifying as it was that she was not taking his hesitation in her presence as a slight to her, and that she understood his discomfort was with the falsehood entirely and likely would limit her antics to the bare basics of what was required for her subterfuge only… this remained exceedingly awkward for him. Slightly less so now than earlier, but acutely bothering to a noticeable degree.

"As Shamal once put it, I'm a lady friend. Both a girl and I can be a friend, so technically it shouldn't be that much of a stretch to claim me as a girlfriend." Here she shot a pointed look at his wrists. "As long as you're actually eating, otherwise I might as well become a mother hen."

He instinctively tugged at the cuffs covering in a nervous habit he had not noticed he acquired, specifically stilling his hands he shot her a pointed look back. "I've never shared space with a woman not my girlfriend, Sonya."

"Well I've never shared space with a man that wasn't either five-six and/or seven, family, or a decently long-term friend of mine." A hesitation had him refraining from commenting until she spoke, which didn't remotely help his aims any when she gave voice to the thought that occurred to her. "Or Fong. But Fong's… a weird case. Fong doesn't count."

…Verde knew he would regret asking, but his damnable curiosity surged to the forefront and snuck out of his mouth without adequate approval from his higher functions. "Why does he not count?"

Mingxia's brother, and Yaozu's student… he was a friend of hers as well, correct?

"Hostage situation. There was pretty much no where else to sleep." Pausing before rising off the bedspread for whatever aim she might be interested in next, she slanted a somewhat suspicious look that took him in from head to toe. "...you're… not going to have a weird obsession with my ass, right?"

...he lied. Verde was utterly uncomfortable now. He really, more than simply assuredly should not… nevertheless… "...define 'weird'."

Fuck his insatiable, voracious curiosity.

Sonya stood up, turned around, and rose up to the balls of her feet while craning her neck about to see her own posterior and physically poke at the feature of her anatomy in question. "I mean… it's an ass. Why do some men like to grab hold of it? If you seriously think about it, it should be the last thing anyone would want to grip hold of."

"If one seriously considered human anatomy entirely, all the systems and various methods of waste disposal involved, grasping any part of another's anatomy is always seemingly off to oneself." Why did he do this to himself? "However, as my education suggests, it may have more to do with our earlier ancestors than due to any other environmental or societal influences. One's hips and rear posterior, on a female form such as your own, would suggest if you possessed superior
'childbearing' attributes to any suitors at a glance alone. On a male it would show 'athleticism' and how fit one was to hunt and gather for any family unit."

…and she wasn't even the first woman he had this exact conversation with.

"…so Fong's a butt man. I still find it weird, but I guess I can understand that in this context. China's had a shit-ton of strife and food shortages in recent decades, they're probably still recovering from that so he might not see a whole lot of them." Dropping back to her heels, the thief wandered off to her purse instead of face him again. "Must be still fascinating, even with the Triad women having better nutrition than most. Huh."

He could not find fault with her distraction as he endeavored not to recall the last time he had this conversation, or the first instance. The original situation he got backhanded across the face, the second time the lady in question had just wanted an opening to request his assistance with her calculus homework… the third was now an ex-girlfriend.

…despite fruitlessly willing it otherwise, he was now ruminating on his old college flame again.

"What else do you find strange? I have taken several classes of numerous fields of study, including psychology and anatomy although I focused more seriously elsewhere…"

Verde needed a mouth filter. He should not have said that.

He resignedly took in how gleefully the woman turned around, now he had offered her an avenue of investigation her likely prodigious book collection would not typically cover given it was utilized by some children for their schoolwork and Hawk had personally curated any more recent additions for suitability, then grimly resigned himself to making this even more awkward than it really should've been.

However, as he had opened the topic for discussion he would… somehow undergo both the dialogue and subsequent personal space invasion for several days. It was rather the least he could do in exchange for her understanding of his discomfort and the effort she was going through on his behalf to safeguard his future appearances as an individual of scientific worth.

Verde sometimes felt a bit of disquiet when Adrik, and now this woman, professed so much faith in his intelligence. He was clever, it was impossible to not notice or conceal he was, but then episodes like this happened…

"So... is blue or green hair dominate? Genetically speaking, I mean. I've seen women with pure white hair, two men with pure yellow eyes, my brother is fucking purple, and you're green. But Larion has brown hair when his mother has hair greener than yours. So it could possibly be recessive, right? I thought purple, or at least the reds, had to be dominate, but I don't recall enough of the genetic four-square to figure it out myself. I was taught on 'blonde, brown, and blue eyes' as examples not 'green, white, and purple eyes'. Besides, Larion's an only child right now."

Genetics was a brilliant subject matter.

A spectacular one.

By far his new preferred subject of study, beyond his preoccupation with Ovis aries or Bombyx mori genetic strains on her godson's behalf.

Pressing his glasses to sit higher on the bridge of his nose, Verde swiftly expounded what was and what wasn't dominant or recessive to an appreciatively intent audience of one. Given how quickly she dove for a messily kept pad of memo paper to then take note upon, he somewhat absently
wondered if he had somehow found a series of topics to default to when the situation became strange between them due to her ruse.

What parts of her education did Sonya also miss out on, to go with the lacking paper degree for her master's in 'Foreign Affairs'?
(Friday the 16th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

**Apparently**, snow white or 'pale-ness' and metallic genes were *incredibly rare* and recessive traits in human DNA. Paleness in hair or eye colors were almost unknown traits that only randomly popped up under conditions not well documented, and metallic-shading to either eyes or hair were more easily tracked but tended to be hooked to only certain color genes. If you had no chance for the metallic-shaded parent's color, which was usually recessive to begin with, whatever you ended up with would not be metallic either.

DNA and RNA shit wasn't for another decade or just still pending announcement, or at least she tentatively assumed greater understanding of the human genetic code hadn't been started in on yet. Traits, as in gene traits passed on from genetic contributors, was a well-practiced if less understood including everything from animal breeding to historic bloodline records in humans to plant strains.

Meaning the bulk of the explanation she got for the pastel colors and wildly strange mixes were all still based on suppositions and the *massively fucking phenomenal* amount of documentation provided by history as countless generations of scientists or theologists tried to understand the same question. What was currently thought was good enough for answering the basics of her question of it, but something she needed to check back in again later on for the full answer if she so wanted.

Greys, everything from her own eye coloring to naturally grey hair to Nilda's white-blond to just pure white, were… excuse her French, thought to be outright 'error' codes. Not that there was anything wrong with her genes, just that the mix of DNA that dictated her eye color just couldn't figure out how to produce the color it said her eyes should be since there were conflicting instructions from her personal mix of biological instructions. That Nilda's platinum blonde was just that, blonde, was not touched upon nor did Verde treat it as a possibility while covering that shade of human-possible hair colors.

Grey was somewhat common when you crossed two dominate and wildly different hues, like Verde's green and Mingxia's red eyes in a new child, but it was a trait Sonya was unlikely to pass on to any biological children she might hypothetically have as they'd get one of her colors and the male donor's to express in how that would result. A one in ten chance, in other words.

You'd *think* it'd just result in brown… but no. Grey.

She hadn't volunteered a 'blonde should cover everything from off-white to straw yellow in one gene' and 'likewise red might contain everything from carrot orange to pastel pink to blood red' to him, for one she had no way to justify that to someone like Verde who would want the basis for her certainty and for another this was based off another lifetime of there being only five or so 'main' colors and a shit ton shades of them human hair could naturally be. Which, when you added in *acid green, earthy green, outright fucking purple, and* deep-sea blue to the 'natural' range… her assumption might not be remotely correct anymore in the end anyways.

Yellows like the amnesiac Hawk's eye coloring was less than just uncommon, as in one in twenty thousand born with the right mix would have yellow eyes and both parents having yellow eyes did not always guarantee one in ten children would at least have the same. Her natural hair coloring was *more common* than having yellow eyes, meaning science had not yet hit upon the right explanation for the duality of yellow eyes being so rare while yellow hair was significantly less so.
when most other color genes tended to be either dominant or recessive in both genetic expressions.

Possibly meant there were more like the yellows being one somewhat common and the other nearly impossible to specifically breed in, but again that would need confirmation when someone finally made the breakthrough on how to read DNA at all.

Greens were dominate as she had suspected, but blue hues were the most common recessive gene in human biology only beating out blondes by a small margin of possible error. Brown/brunettes were still dominate as well, hence why Larion was a brunette like his father when his mother had earth-green hair.

However, Ruslana's green apparently was a 'false' green. Blue recessive and a blonde recessive trait with a tagging 'cross' gene that enabled some rare mixing traits resulted in her darker hair color than Verde's acidic Crayola green. It was really unlikely her housekeeper would pass on her earthy green hair to any further children, and why Larion matched Afanasii in coloring instead of the rare chance to inherit his mother's green hair. The scientist would more than likely pass on his greens, as his was a 'true' or 'pure' dominate green gene.

Reds as in Tatiana's fiery red hair would probably be passed on to two out of four children she had. Her blue eyes might end up in one of those hypothetical children, otherwise it was a greater chance her blue would just be buried into her kid's genes until someone hit the genetic lottery again. You needed Tatiana's red gene to have pink hair like Klavdia's, but that red gene had to be matched up perfectly with the 'pale-ness' recessive to not give a garbled mess expressed with black or grey hues instead. The tetchy torture specialist/nurse/possible assassin would probably never pass on her hair coloring, but a strong red or white instead as the genes to make her pink split up in her sprogs… with the slightly less rare possibility of another less 'error-code' color hue of 'false orange'.

Not 'ginger', in other words. That was still a thing, but there was an even smaller fraction of people with 'false orange' without the excessively easily compromised pale skin.

As she had suspected but wasn't sure of until Verde confirmed it for her, it wasn't exactly like mixing pigment hues in paint… but it was almost like that with a few extra bits of DNA scientists weren't sure of. Hence the 'cross', 'false', and 'error' descriptors to certain colorations.

There was just something lacking, off, or just expressed differently than what the compiled documentation of human coloring variants told scientist there should be. Those three modifiers confused the issue massively more than certain colors in specific expressions being more/less rare than the other way around, because not all humans had those three suspected traits buried deep in their DNA makeup to express in their future offspring.

…like how not all of the human race was able to reach into their Dying Will to pull out Flames. Sonya hadn't distracted her impromptu lecturer to pose that rough theory, but she recorded it to ask to Verde later once he had the time to devote some into investigating that coincidence and science advanced enough to possibly answer it.

What she took away from that lecture was the weird color variants had popped up enough in recorded human history to ensure that someone being born with… say… grey eyes and blood-red hair when the father was solidly a brunette and the mother had only one 'weird' coloring variant in a green hue herself didn't often result in accusations of infidelity. With as much fascination as the old European royalty had put into controlling the features/colors of their royal lines, there was a lot of generational data to crunch from the old nobility's on/off fads in maybe giving their children genetically imperative signs of what family lines they came from.

Brunette was still a widely common coloring for anyone from every race, about a little over fifty
percent of the world's population had at least brown eyes or hair or some combination therein… and it was a legitimate color not a 'error' color message the body was producing when it couldn't read whatever.

However.

You needed both the red dominate and blue recessive genes to result in a purple hue to either eyes or hair which wasn't all that hard to do with enough luck in one or the other but Cherep had come up gold with both… which was a one in a ten-thousand or so chance to happen. She had been wrong; her brother possibly but more than likely wouldn't pass on his natural 'Cloud' coloration to his kids. It'd be more likely his kids would then be blue or reds in both hair and eye coloring with one in four having a purple tone somewhere and one in sixteen might have both as he did.

The scientist that covered the topic for her was another of those genetic lottery types if just with a less stupidly finicky color, rather than be like Ruslana and have one color for his hair and another with his eyes.

Apparently some people really liked that they matched in coloring to whatever other feature, but it really wasn't more than just a 'jackpot' kind of result and therefore unlikely to be expressed in their children in the exact mix the men in question had.

Hue, shades, and if your hair or eye color contained more than one or two at once were not well understood traits compared to the base 'main' colors possible. Obviously people still went white with advanced aging, everything stretching from gunmetal grey to pure bone white depending on the shades one started with, and one's colors could still lighten or darken over the course of their lifetimes depending on how well the body could produce eumelanin and pheomelanin that controlled the color of your hair.

Eumelanin and Pheomelanin. Otherwise known as skin/hair/eye color pigment. Why Verde separated it into two different terms wasn't honestly clear and something to ask when they had another awkward moment to spend together. He had to run to his initial meet-n-greet meeting thing to hear why all these egg-heads were gathered up in one city, which prevented her asking and allowed her the time to get a nap in.

In all, it was a fascinating topic to hear about for being a complete waste of time. Knowing how her genetics worked to give her grey eyes or how/why her siblings ended up the colors they had would not remotely enrich her lifestyle, improve her skills, or solve world-hunger… but she had wondered, and he had been so polite to ask if she had anything else she'd like explained to her.

Besides, giving the man something to ramble on about had done more to set him at ease at being left alone in her presence than any amount of talking had trying to do that exact thing. With him expounding on about 'true', 'false', and 'cross' genes to explain what science thought on how and why random people ended up with random hair colors when their parents had completely different ones he didn't overthink or stress himself out about being alone in a hotel room with her.

Which legitimately concerned her a little.

Sonya, absolutely, totally, and unequivocally hated trespassing where she wasn't wanted… in social situations. Especially in social situations she actually cared about. Obviously, Verde did not want her as close as she needed to be to pretend to be his girlfriend. Apparently either as a friend or whatever else, he was just totally uncomfortable closer than socially acceptable for casual contacts and she felt fucking terrible about forcing it on him anyways.

Odd, given she didn't normally care. However, he was kind of important and she knew Shamal was
warming up to the grouchy scientist lurking in her basement as an authority figure to take any complicated 'science' or logical issues to. He was bugging the hell out of the poor man, because Shamal was the kind of brat that needed to force something nearly to the breaking point to figure out how stable it might be for him to rely on, but Verde was a sturdy type and was weathering the Mist's attentions rather fantastically well for a Lightning.

The man almost never ate on a schedule, drank beer like a fish, got distracted and wandered off when a new idea occurred to him, and just generally wasn't the most social butterfly in the room… but honestly that all was more than right to her. She didn't either and occasionally slept through the day, preferred harder liquors, probably wandered off on her own more than enough, and was also more a wallflower than… anything…

Frankly… Verde was the closest to 'Arseniy' she had ever found.

He might not be built like her father, but seriously who needed to be when she could be as physically strong as she wanted?

Verde could lecture like her foster father, concisely and straightforward unless you asked the right questions to get more details. Probably a bit wordier… but not until you asked those right questions. He had his motivations, was equally as bullheaded about getting what he wanted until he had it and could probably match her father in pounding back beer if he so chose.

Sonya reached over, abandoning Alek's velvety ears and getting huffed at for it, to grab a pillow she had been napping on to smother her face in.

That was entirely too weird for a line of random thought. She needed a new one that was less bizarre.

Holy fuck her chest hurt.

Well, not nearly as bad as it had been even a week before. The bruises were healing nicely, just with that stupid ring-pattern still. It ached, which was annoying. Long-term aches and soreness just rubbed her the wrong way, lingering annoyances that frequently reminded her that some asshole had shot her like the little fucker they were tended to be worse than the 'fuck I was stupid' hurts she was more familiar with.

When she pressed the heel of her right hand on top of her upper chest 'Cloud Voodoo' scar Alek shifted, putting his lower jaw on her thigh at a slightly awkward looking angle and gazing at her with almost palpable concern. He feebly wagged his tail when she met his mismatched eyes, batting twice at her ribcage gently before stilling again, but didn't seem in the mood to protest her cessation of pets nor begging to be played with.

He just apparently wanted to stare at her, well okay then.

The hotel Verde's egghead conference thing had gotten for their attendees wasn't one with a pet-friendly policy for guests, but five hundred euros paid to the manager smoothed her canine's presence at all over with the staff. Alek wasn't exactly welcome in a higher-end place like this than what fare she normally got, but with a bribe paid at the very least keeping her dog in the room with her wouldn't have them thrown out.

Verde might not be best pleased to get back from his first 'official' day as a collected scientist for whatever the hell this shit was for only to find his already cramped personal space would also be invaded by big-but-still-growing dog. If so she'd make it up to him somehow, but more than probably later as well.
Fuckity fuck fuck. Having *people* was fucking *tiring*.

Too upset and jittery to go back to napping, but still tired enough and jet-lagged to have attempted to sleep more after something woke her up only to fail like this… she'd figure something out tonight if Verde really was so honestly against sharing even bed space with her when there was even a doggy chaperone at hand to supervise whatever, the thief reluctantly dragged herself out of bed and over to her luggage.

…really, she just wanted a hug. Was that too much to ask?

Didn't having more people mean she should have more opportunities to get a hug if she so chose?

There wasn't anyone nearby she'd ask for a hug from, unfortunately. Verde wasn't okay with her touching him, so she couldn't even make do with what was at hand.

Wrapped in cheesecloth rubbed with beeswax, tied up into a neat bundle with twine, was her supposed scroll from the Imperial Library of Constantinople. Or Alexandria. She hadn't believed the claims but protected the obviously old thing anyways on the small chance it was as described to her at the time of purchase.

Ignoring how cold the hotel's air conditioned interior was against her bare thighs, especially when she slid into the leather chair provided to give a seat at a mostly bare desk provided in this room, she dragged the thing onto the surface first before hunting through that particular satchel to find the odds and ends she would use to figure out if it was genuine or not. Verde had a flannel shirt in mixed in with his apparent 'laundry' suitcase, which thankfully didn't make her want to sneeze and was at least worn enough to be more comfortable than her tank tops.

It wasn't Renato's old silk shirt… but she had left that in her closet back home instead of risk damaging it. Then again, she now had an entire fucking *closet* of clothing the asshole left her to store for him. She could always steal more from it likely without much protest as well… if it all didn't still *smell like him*. As that would depress her every fucking night, she'd just steal one of Verde's instead and not make herself miserable.

More miserable. Whatever.

Sonya *could* read Greek now, slowly and her pronunciation was utter *shit*. The problem was that while Greek letters hadn't changed for nearly a millennium and a half… the style of writing those letters *had*. Modern day Greek made use of 'white space' between words and Arabic numerals, ancient Greek had no spaces to signify the end of a word and the beginning of the next and used Greek numerals.

Furthermore, there were about 'ten' ancient Greek dialects that would change *any number of factors* about how it was written at all. Popular in different places, different times, and could mean any number of things depending on the 'who' wrote this. She didn't recall them all off-hand, but she bought a book about it that was stored with the scroll while traveling. In Greek, because *practice*.

Rolling up the oversized sleeves on the shirt she was using as a nightgown so her forearms were barred enough to give her full range of movement but her tattoos weren't exposed, she dug into the twine to unroll her find and took in the absolute *mess* of fragments she had to match together to even begin trying to see if she could remotely read the scroll at all.

All of which… only may or may not belong with this document.

Snatching up her hygiene kit next, and ignoring Alek behind her stretching out across the bedspread
now he had sole possession of it like the greedy thing he was, Sonya pulled a set of tweezers out of a side-pocket and meticulously started cleaning it with her small stash of rubbing alcohol while trying to find a good spot to start in on.

Regardless of where she started, this was going to take hours.

…maybe she should walk the dog first.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 16th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

"Sonya… are you…" Cold?

Wearing one of his shirts?

Unaware of just how many times one of the young men working here had passed by the same window to gain repetitive glimpses of her loitering about since Verde caught sight of her standing outside their hotel?

"…alright?"

The greatly mussed and rather sleepy looking current brunette blinked up at him, with neither surprise nor any remote concern in her expression, from her preoccupation of rather boredly waited out her animal's obsession with if he was going to scent-mark a bush near the hotel or not.

After seriously giving his question some gratifying thought and pulling the pipe stem from between her teeth to enable clear speech, she then merely shrugged slightly as she turned fully towards his approach. "…yeah? I just was too jittery to nap more, so I got up for a little while. Why?"

He looked down, at not only her bare toes but a significant amount of tanned legs and thighs she seemed utterly unconcerned with barring in public. Following his gaze, the thief stepped backwards to fully see her feet and revealed she had at least a pair of form-fitting shorts on under the frankly familiar button-down shirt he was dreadfully certain had come from his luggage… which also stretched across her contoured chest region more than it would on a man's form.

He swiftly looked away from her upper body before he was certain if she was wearing a bra or not, the thief's feet were a much safer topic.

"…why are you looking at my toes?"

"We are approaching the meteorological start of autumn, how are you not chilled standing here exposed to late summer weather conditions?"

The blaser woman shrugged that off diffidently as she stopped leaning backwards and causing very questionable gaps to appear between the buttons holding the shirt closed over her skin, taking another pull of her pipe before lethargically responding once a fellow lollygagging scientific researcher finally wandered out of earshot if failed to cease shoot them both looks he was not reading into. "I don't have to be cold if I don't want to be. It's just remembering I can do that when I do get cold… honestly I thought it was the hotel at first, but no it's just cold outside and I don't feel like going back inside yet."

Interesting and convenient application of possessing a Flame aside, that did not address his concerns.
Honestly at a loss and without an earthly clue on how to appropriately inform the woman her attire might be considered indecent for this establishment without undue drama, nor how to continue the conversation with the eventual aim of herding her inside without setting off anything his strangely weary boss might not appreciate… Verde fidgeted with his cuffs.

Should he offer her his suit jacket?

Although… she had already claimed she was not cold however seemingly underdressed as she was. Additionally, another layer on her upper body would not solve the greater issue of the apparently distracting view of her skin and bare legs which likely was the current issue those around them had with her mode of dress as well as further compound the issue with her seemingly being dressed in his clothing.

Thusly, not the solution to this dilemma regardless if his hazy and oft ignored etiquette training from childhood demanded he offer the article of clothing to a young lady who might possibly discomfited by environmental or social or her own attire factors.

It was not like he could offer her his trousers. On one side of that debate… the woman had apparently already helped herself to his clothing already and he suspected offering use of anything of his possessions to a thief was merely a fantastical way to ensure they would continue stealing from his pool of situationally limited belongings. On the other, he was wearing his trousers and required the same item to remain decently attired himself so offering their use at all would not remotely solve this quandary merely shift who would then be the target of undue attention from onlookers.

More than most who were Verde's fellow attendees to the summit, given how many were quartered in the same hotel as them.

Likely, such a proposal as the offer of his trousers would result in merely a change of target with less understanding and tolerance. He did not believe his legs would be admired more than salaciously gossiped about or rudely condemned regardless of the reason why he would do something to so expose himself to public viewing.

Offering to fetch a pair for her equally held as many pitfalls once the logistics were worked out. The woman may just not wish to wear trousers for her own reasons, and likewise offering to fetch one of her skirts was putting an expectation that she brought any number along with her. Which may or may not be true, as well as require him to go through her own possessions and possibly come across something he would not wish to locate in them.

Like her underthings. He knew she had brought along one skirt, the one she wore earlier to extract him from the pre-meeting debate in the barroom… however he did not know what she preferred to do with items of clothing she had already worn.

Did he then offer to fetch her a jacket or long coat?

Unfortunately, that offer then circled around to 'she did not feel underdressed for the day's more autumn-like weather patterns' problem as with the option of offering his suit jacket. Equally, that offer may not solve the logistical issue of her short attire proving to be a significant distraction to others merely passing by if she possessed no jacket or coat the desired length for more suitable decency.

…still rude to imply he had a preference for a lady's nominal attire when he really had no right to base such views upon, therefore not an option he would be further contemplating.

His somewhat lengthy preoccupation with trying to puzzle out an answer to an issue she saw no
issue with attracted the still sharp-eyed if tired-seeming thief's attentions more solidly on his presence than her canine's antics exploring the world to the limits of his teether. "You realize you're about to have limited privacy for the next few days, right? You should get most of what can't wait done while I'm not in there."

"I have shared college dorm rooms with others, Sonya. I am well acquainted with the logistics of sharing a limited space with another." Admittedly those past roommates were all male. "I am more concerned that you do not seem entirely... awake."

...or dressed appropriately, though that was still a non-issue to her he did not foresee bringing up to accomplish much in any aims to address it.

Aggravatingly, she snorted her disagreement. "The kid who passed the window sixteen... no, now seventeen times? The three men in the conference room behind me, who have lingered well past whatever they were in there for just to ogle my ass? No? How about Hawk trying really hard to pose as a gardener who is blatantly staring over here instead of trimming that hedge as his cover probably needs? I know I'm attracting attention. Fuck me if I can figure out why beyond the obvious 'cat-calling' bullshit. I wear less when I go to any public beach, some of the women I've seen standing out here are wearing even less up top and only an inch or so more on their legs, why my attire so damn distracting now is... well, weird."

Perhaps because she was seemingly attired in a man's shirt and nothing else, obviously rumpled by sleep and possibly something else less innocent, and just generally existed when he privately doubted most of the scientific minds gathered together got out of the laboratories long enough to recall female forms were something to aesthetically appreciate at all?

Sonya was very obviously female seemingly with little issue against those who cared to note the same. Obviously, from her words alone, she had detected the attention an attribute of her very existence might earn her. However, if there was a disconnect between the idea of 'attracting attention' and her 'state of dress' in admittedly understandably similar public locals then... he wasn't quite sure how to help her aside perhaps further exposition on the differences rather than the similarities to give her more information to draw her own theories from.

"Implications." At her arched eyebrow he expounded further a touch reluctantly. "For what reason would one assume a young woman would go about dressed in clothing not her own as you are right now?"

"...because I left mine at home?" Countered the thief flatly, apparently becoming more than fed up with the topic and therefore pressing on may just further annoy his paymaster entirely. "I usually sleep in... well, this way. I just... my old one is... was... Renato's. And I didn't bring it."

FUCK.

"Sorry for taking it? It's just more comfortable right now over the... um." As the woman was not undisciplined enough to physically show her upset at the reminder of something likely still sore and raw as a blatant reminder of her close friend's demise, only the fact she then found her animal companion's sudden closeness more fascinating than looking directly at whom she was speaking to was the only sign of her sudden upset. "I can go change if it bothers you... just what I have is too tight."

...what?

Verde, while knowing he had possibly just trod upon something very personally upsetting for her and not wishing to trouble her more over the unfortunate death of her fellow godparent by asking for
clarification if she would become further or unconsolably upset at the mere mention, gingerly ran those few statements back through his mind again to try and understand.

Gallingly, he failed.

Her statement did not fully make sense upon a third or even fourth subsequent review wherein which he tried to draw additional details from snippets of information he had learned being part of the residents in her new home. "If it would not bother you to explain... how is what you have 'too tight' to necessitate borrowing from my belongings?"

"...I suppose," the woman didn't clarify at all as she tapped out the remainder of what tobacco and ash might linger in her pipe bowl, while squinting up at him somewhat suspiciously instead of inspect her efforts to remove a fire hazard from her person, "I should show you. There is a bit of a risk of stains, after all. Later though, I don't feel like getting into that subject right now."

As long as there was elucidation pending, Verde could live with the temporary avoidance as niggling as the suspicion would be until the undefined point of time. There were subjects they both were privy to that would not conduct themselves well for public discussion, beyond any personal reasons she might have to desire looser clothing than her own attire normally was.

...although... "Is it a biological process? If so, I do not require an explanation."

"...sure. Let's go with that for now." Without the grace to look mildly chagrined by the reference or her indifferent agreement, she waggled the smoking implement in his face. "More importantly, is there another little meeting thing you need to attend today or are you done?"

"There will be a dinner-"

"Of fucking course." Slightly shaking her head as she glanced upward into the sky overhead, the thief blew out a non-ashy sigh. "Figures. Fong's stupid tournament thing had an opening banquet too."

"I cannot tell if that is a comment on the nature of either social engagement and how they are structured or a complaint..."

"...it's a complaint. I didn't get enough sleep to make up the jet lag... but whatever. Sure, dinner. How dressy?"

Reminded of the initial observations that drew him to a halt before her, Verde glanced down her form and then to his own attire. "I am led to believe not many of the others intend to change before meeting back up at the restaurant."

Some facet of that information rather irked her, given the utterly flat expression now aimed up at him. "Where?"

"Le Cénacle. I was led to believe the restaurant is within the hotel complex... is there a problem?"

"You don't need to change or whatever, but fuck knows I have to. I still find this unfair."

While this was the initial occasion any such complaint had been made to him, he tried to contemplate how her attendance as dressed as she was now would result.

...he did not believe that would be very conductive to her own reputation and imply traits to them both he at least did not wish to cultivate. "Perhaps I should go alone, if you feel a greater need for more rest instead?"
"No, there's…" Trailing off, the thief made a somewhat frustrated gesture before giving a sharp whistle. Her canine companion heeded that signal with all due haste, abandoning the taraxacum he had been pawing at curiously to return to her side. "Fuck. Let's talk inside."

Verde's hand was then suddenly seized in a grip he could never hope to break, and the woman pulled not only himself but the animal inside with her. Rather surprised by the sudden change in how willing she was to remain outside, although not against a change of venue in the first place as that was the initial motivation behind why he halted to converse with her at all, he then had to deliberate if he was more receptive to hand holding than any other option she might have to guide him about if she needed.

It would be more conductive to what he was familiar with in his early etiquette training as a young man of high class, not only to provide less questionable happenings to supply the illusion she was intending to maintain, if she instead held his arm instead. The thief's grip was somewhat loose if unforgiving, and it took two attempts to free his wrist this occasion, before she let him resituate her hold to something admittedly more old-fashioned than most tended to utilize these days.

Although she appeared somewhat curious, she did not pass along a comment about his rearrangement so he could likely assume she did not mind conforming to what limited familiarity he had with escorting a lady about.

"Is there a reason for your sudden desire to converse elsewhere?"

"…there may or may not be someone I don't want to talk to again out there. Aside really pushy assholes, I'd rather talk to you somewhere I can ensure is free from well-meaning eavesdroppers for more sensitive details." Raising her right hand, with the dog leash looped about her wrist and her tobacco pipe held between three of her fingers lengthwise, she smothered a yawn into her palm. "Besides, I need a shower anyways."

…Verde had a sudden desire for a beer or three, likely two floors down and in the hotel's bar instead of ordered by room service while she might be so occupied. As well appointed as the room he had been allocated was, the ensuite was not lavishly appointed with excessive space to guarantee privacy from one another.

As she herself had pointed out, there was to be a severe reduction in the amount of privacy both would otherwise enjoy. While she had surprisingly expressed regret for imposing on him due to requirements she had set to safeguard him, it was the least he could do in return to ensure she had as much to herself as it would be possible as well.

Additionally, an awareness and acceptance of being treated as merely a feminine figure to admire for personal aims did not necessitate equal awareness and permittance of being treated solely as.

"De Mort!"

"…fuck." Was his companion's opinion, bitterly spoken. "Think we can run for it?"

"Would that level of haste be necessary?" Verde somewhat recognized the woman stalking her way closer to them and the canine, although before she had been less elegantly attired he was sure she had been one of only three other women in the room when they were being introduced to one another and the overview of why they had all been called together by the French member organization of CECAM, the European Center for Atomic and Molecular Calculations. "I see no reason to avoid or insult another attendee…"

"De Mort, are you sure that-"
"For fuck's sake I've not even started decrypting the dratted thing. I have to reassemble as much as possible from the fragments first, and that will take hours." Giving the woman an equally flat look back for the scowl aimed in her direction, Sonya reluctantly released him to fully turn around and address the other scientist. "Ask me in two days, if it's so damn important."

"And then you'll weasel out of selling me the scroll. What the hell are you going to do with a treatise on Stoic Physics anyways?"

"You could not remotely afford it, even if it turns out to be a fake." His boss flatly deadpanned with a dismissive flick of her empty pipe, giving her a pointedly skeptical glance from head to toe. "Besides, I'd store it within the appropriate environment for preservation until the contents become of interest… if it's remotely real."

The woman Verde was moderately sure had been introduced to him as an inorganic chemist stiffened up in outrage, and her subsequent statements were delivered through clenched teeth. "And what, if anything, would that do for the furtherment of historic preservation in the field of scientific thought or future study into the topic?"

"What the hell do I care?" Sonya bit back with legitimate hostility to her own tone, deftly ensuring Alek did not have the leeway to lunge or otherwise harass the other woman away from his mistress by winding the leash about her wrist and effortlessly holding back her still growing beast of an animal. "As of right now, there is no historic or real value to the document. I'm still investigating. Would you fucking piss off now."

"...I fail to understand why a treatise on ancient Roman natural philosophy is of such contention." He mildly interjected in hopes of either an answer or a reduction of tensions, only to miserably fail when both women shot him a glare of nearly equal intensity. "It is Sonya's property, and of yet is of dubious value to either of you. Any real debate should be left until there is something to contend about, although in the end it is still of sole possession of."

"I get you're sleeping with her, but you especially should be behind preserving the history of the scientific method. It wasn't remotely right, nor was it entirely wrong, but it still is of value to."

"Fuck your fucking bullshit." Interrupted the highly offended thief, which Verde felt equally offended if in an unusually obtuse way but not to the level his pretend girlfriend was apparently feeling. "I am a mother-fucking historian. If it belongs anywhere, outside the fact I fucking bought it in the first place, it belongs with me."

…she had a very obvious if succinct point. Although pointing such out would likely do him no good in either woman's opinion, as they seemed intent on severely disliking each other's entire being on principle.

"It belongs in either a university or a museum, for."

"It belongs in my library. Now on principle if not because I said so."

"Would a simple copy of the contents not benefit you more?" Verde wondered aloud, unable to really help himself and apparently gambling with his near future comfort if the look his boss leveled on him was of any substance. "If only to settle any further conflict for the duration of the summit, as the original is apparently of fragile constitution as much as I am unsure if you can read ancient Greek… miss…?"

"It's highly unlikely to be real anyways!" Sonya exasperatedly interjected before the chemist could finish giving him an unsettling dark glare for such a minor point of protest, sliding an arm back
through his and almost forcibly tugging not only Verde but the poor canine off their feet by purposely starting to physically walk away from the entire conversation. "I regret ever mentioning it in the first place."

"Why did you if this was the result?" He was not particularly bothered at the abrupt and likely excessively rude exit they had obtained from the other woman, as he had an excuse for why perhaps she would likely not hold against him as much as apparently taking his 'girlfriend's' side on the querulous debate had.

"...she asked what I had that was 'more important' than a gathering of scientific minds to the, and here I quote, 'largest and most prestigious European society for computational advancements'. I told her. Then... that." Still somewhat vexed, the thief wrenched open their hotel room door and shot McCarthy a dark glower across the hall for likely 'being useless' as she had previously termed the bodyguards. "Nice work delaying her."

"I'm mostly certain 'annoying the shit out of you' does not, in fact, equate 'threats to greenie's life' over there." Observed the Mafia Land agent sadistically, still grinning somewhat disquietly. "Besides, confirmation and shit."

"Fuck off. Two hours."

"...the dinner is planned to begin at six sharp, Sonya."

"An hour and a half, then."

"Hear that, Hawk? An hour and a half to piss and shave before getting your ass back here." Called the older man down the hall, getting a somewhat muffled response back that sounded somewhat harsh and not complimentary.

"Charming." Sonya deadpanned while shoving Verde somewhat impatiently to enter their room on his own, thankfully. "Find a book or something, Verde."

"...I had the thought to visit the bar downstairs to give you some measure of privacy."

"Thank you, but not necessary. I did just dismiss your guards to their own aims. We can go down in about half an hour, this shouldn't take me long." In fact, assembling what she deemed required for a public dinner event took less searching than he had assumed.

Two items already laid out for later collection apparently for just this situation, a purple dress from one suitcase, heels from another, and the woman then shut herself in the bathroom leaving himself and her canine companion in the main room of their temporary accommodations.

Verde looked down at Alek, who gazed skeptically back up at him for a moment before deeming him uninteresting and leaping up to the rumpled bedspread to stretch out upon.

Well. He glanced about the room for some inspiration to eat up the required time, and to not listen to Sonya taking a shower less than five meters away.

…unfortunately, there was little to be had within his own personal effects and to be obtained from the room. Thus he was left with the possibility of hunting through her luggage for 'a book or something', investigating the items she had laid out on the desk that helped furnish their temporary residence which likely was the document in ancient Greek he also had no hope of comprehending in a limited time frame, or hoping someone had left something in the drawers to occupy his time.

A bit uncomfortable as the water lines started sounding a temporary protest to be chased by the
subsequent noises of water splashing off a hard obstruction, Verde's gaze landed on Sonya's memo pad left abandoned on the side of the bed his boss has apparently claimed for her own use.

More than sure her encryptions should rely on the contents of her work for an organization as pervasive as Mafia Land and therefore be incomprehensible to him to preserve her privacy, at the least he could review what she had taken away from the genetics topic and possibly obtain further subjects to speak upon over dinner if he failed to find a more topical one they could discuss in public.

...if he could comprehend her notetaking. The short-hand had eliminated a great measure of detail and context to work out their meanings, there were numbered sequential letter combinations that one could assume stood for specific colors but more 'b's than he would assume... one of the 'b's was connected to the 'y's.

Blonde and yellow?

Why would she specifically differentiate between them?

Doubling the elements needed to separate eye and hair colorations accounted for the number of different numbered letter stand-ins, revealing there was indeed a separate label for both yellow hair and yellow eyes. He wondered why she specifically created herself more work while presumably needing to record the facts as quickly as Verde could give them.

Assuming this was not in Russian letters, and he had more than a passing familiarity with Cyrillic given what language Sonya's formidable literary collection was mainly in. As a native, her handwriting should give each letter the characteristics to be identified as specifically Cyrillic under at least some study, so one could assume this was in a Continental Romance language.

...or English.

Verde squinted at the pen marks suspiciously as he took a seat on the side of the provided accommodations she would apparently be taking possession of, assuming however he wished it to read a Romance language then worked out more evenly for certain shades to account for. Not exactly evenly, there were elements he was missing and too many additions to justify for.

'R's for red, a 'b' needed to be for blue, 'g' obviously stood for either green or 'grey', there was no 'o' for orange. Neither was there a 'w' for white.

R2(d) + G2(d) = -GGRG(dd) /= R2(dx) + G2(d) = +GGRG(dxd) was not recognizably an equation he had elucidated for her.

Out of context, it also meant nothing to him.

Curious.

He also failed to grasp R1(rg+) + X1(rxx) = R1(rgx) as a comprehensible equation, although 'R1(rg?) + B1(d?) / R2(rx?) + B2(dx?) = RB1(rdx?) / RB2(rdx?). RB = Prpl? not pass' near the end gave him the first clue to laboriously start in on. She had specifically asked about her brother's coloration to be described as best he knew how, and it was the final note she took both as he watched her do so as well as in this section of note paper.

R1 and R2 then had to stand for red eyes and red hair in one or the other sequence, whereas B1 and B2 had to equate blue hair and eyes in a similar two possibilities. The subsequent additional tags of 'r' and 'd' were not expressly clear, neither were 'x' nor '?' aside one being an unknown value and the other possibly being a non-contributing value to later account for in further equations.
Assuming which number stood for eyes and which stood for hair and eliminating the excess formula clarifying the sequence, the passage should then read 'red eyes(rx?) crossed with blue eyes(d?) also red hair(rx?) crossed with blue hair(dx?) resulted in purple eyes(rdx?) also purple hair(rdx?) will not pass on'.

It was mostly true. Merely highly unlikely, although a layman making a broad assumption when the possibility was so remote was not particularly surprising… if wrong.

Plugging the now known variables up near the beginning of this passage of shorthand notes, two full pages of equations and worded passages back, Verde started laboriously working through and quantifying subsequent values to revisit the shorthand he could not read.

If one of the yellows was listed as one of the 'b' variables, then it should be near the top as he had started from white to work his way through the spectrum from white to brown. Interesting that she had seemingly included 'whites' into 'yellows', but that could be accounted for from everything in choosing a stand-in hastily or in error to specifically with intent. Unlikely it was intent, as that could then imply she knew more of the subject than he had when in fact she had been seeking clarification from him.

More plausibly in error, but for clarity's sake she likely and appreciatively had not changed its subsequent appearance in other equations.

Practical, and made for less confusion.

…although, it was highly possible he had her number orientation backwards now he had more examples to decrypt her notes from. 1 apparently stood for hair, while 2 stood for eyes.

Annoying, but an unsurprising error of his own when working off guesswork. Verde went back to the start and re-clarified her notations with that information and worked out at least three more variables on his way back to his previous point.

…grey was + as an integer rather than utilized as a function of the equation?

No, GG was grey. The plus and minus signs were supposedly 'plausibly grey' and 'negatively grey' respectively then, meaning Bnd and GG were again similar shorthand combinations to mean the same result and further illuminated her slightly flawed method to take notes being fixed mid-session for clarity's sake.

He still had no uniformly accurate explanation for the (r), (d), and (x) variables as they were without much context as modifiers or additions. Even assuming (?) stood for unknown variables and (x) stood for any possible, two or three subsequent equations did not work out to any sense even under the context of his prior exposition on the subject.

Recessive and dominate as (r) and (d) was the more likely candidates, however utilizing his knowledge of gene expressions in place of her notes did not uniformly compare as needed to prove a correlation. There seemed only one set of letter/number combinations for a shade of human-possible hair color with one corresponding similar eye color that differed somewhat… then there were the values he determined had been included in error to account for more than one would guess at the same time to account for.

Verde hit the midway point trying to match or discard possible faulty equations from contention, realized the next line was in fact a question not another formula example, and upon fitting in the known values he had for select parts then eliminating redundant examples to pull more information from he was left with 'did DWF-able equal (x)'.

A possibly fascinating and strange inquiry to investigate from someone who had sought illumination on a topic she had limited facts on before. It held the great possibility of being an incorrect theory, however insomuch as the premise she had based the inquiry might be flawed that did not necessitate the subsequent question was of equally dubious value to answer.

A most gratifying reward for the minor effort of educating another in a topic of interest.

"Verde, what are you doing?"

…and now he was very much in trouble. He glanced over somewhat guiltily, glanced away equally as quickly when it became apparent to him she was not in fact dressed in anything remotely approaching clothing at all, and ended up fidgeting with the abused pad of paper in lieu of anything else to occupy his hands. "There is nothing else to read apparent in this environment."

Assuming she had deemed the purple dress as not to her requirements, it was likely not a stretch to equally assume she had returned to find a more proper… dress…

She had to pass in front of him in order to dig through her luggage and her stock of similar fabrics cut in a style colloquially known as 'cocktail dress'. Only one of which seemed to suit her requirements however being she had concealed only a portion of herself in only a towel to retrieve said article of clothing… revealed a bizarrely ringed injury on her upper chest which seemingly had a correlated injury on her upper back.

His limited information on injury patterns failed to identify what happened to leave her with such warped markings of damage, although he made note of them for a later investigation with either someone that knew more of medical concerns or through documents addressing such specifically.

The woman injured in question then turned very pointedly and easily plucked the bound sheaf of paper from between his fingers, discarding it dismissively far away from him to canine possession instead. "There's details in there I am beholden to keep known to a limited number of people. I'd really fucking hate to kill you at this point, and they'd not accept any different outcome if you learn something unwise out of there."

"I had assumed so, therefore limited myself to the most recent entries you recorded on our previous discussion." Alek had placed a paw on the memo pad, baring his teeth in a canine grin to likely dissuade Verde from attempting to retrieve it from him.

"None of which I want to share until I can make a few more inquiries of other sources." Sonya claimed shortly, the length of purple fabric in her hands exchanged for a new bright red one with significantly less material to it. "While I do curate the more deadly information, Verde, I keep the ones that might be in contention until I know for sure it's not important anymore. Just… please don't risk it. You're smart and know enough I'd highly doubt my general precautions would stand the stress testing."

He tapped the pads of his fingers together between his knees, lacking anything more useful to do not only with himself but to distract himself from attempting to go after the puzzle he had been occupied with before her return.

If it had been Marco then retrieving the item would be a simple affair, the shaggy beast of Shamal's was easily distracted by a pat on the head or even the implied promise of being given any attention. Alek was less simple-minded and started out without as much tolerance for those not his mistress attempting to distract him-
A separate volume was forced in front of his face, the utterly flat look the probable owner of said book had informed him his preoccupation was not only noticed but likely accurately guessed at and not remotely appreciated. Without giving notice to any sheepish feeling he may be experiencing, he took it without comment nor complaint.

"Really."

Keeping to his resolve to not give any opinion on the subject, he investigated the topic the volume intended to cover as she slowly left him to redress herself in what was apparently more suited to her intents than the other dress could cover… or conceal.

Once she had left the room a moment spent looking over a shoulder proved Alek was not easily lulled into a false sense of security, the canine had remained watching him speculatively without lifting the paw holding his mistress’ memo pad to the bedspread. Irked he could not finish decrypting her notations without resistance, Verde reluctantly examined the manual of canine training techniques instead.

While he was not nearly as interested in this as he was reviewing her understanding of the topic on genetics as he gave it, as well as the refreshing mental exercise of decrypting a puzzle of notations he held only a few insights on, this was plausibly less contentious in his boss' opinion as well as possibly less dangerous for his continued good health.

…additionally, a familiarity of how she intended to accustom her canine to her work or needs might just give him possible amounts of leeway when her volumes became contested again in the future.

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Sonya wouldn't necessarily label the whole function as a waste of time in a better mood… but it was literally a waste of time. She could've spent the few hours dinner took either reading or sleeping and felt much better about accomplishing either alternative, because apparently not only was she shit at names of people she only just met or didn't intend to mingle with much… Verde was as well.

Actually he was a fraction worse than she was at it. At least she could recognize she had met or seen someone previously, from the number of times the Lightning squinted suspiciously at someone who claimed to know him he couldn't remotely claim anything similar.

In the end, there was free food and booze. After any number of occasions of suffering through her own mistakes in a kitchen, the thief was entirely for getting fed for free. Depending on his budgeting skills, and because he attended college for a number of excessive years apparently, it was entirely possible Verde was of the same mind.

Or it was the beer. The man had downed at least sixteen bottles of beer over the course of the night between dinner and occasional trips off to speak with someone he found important in the restaurant, and only excused himself from her sight to piss once. Even with a Flame user's metabolism heaped on top to eat through the alcohol and calories in beer alone, that was seriously impressive for a non-Storm.

She suspected she had half the solution to his eating problem. Beer was a caloric intensive drink, stupidly so depending on the type and method used to make it. Enough of it on hand and even a Sun would start gaining weight.

Now she just needed to find a solid he liked eating to include everything else a human body needed to function right in his diet.
…hopefully Zinaida's mead would substitute, otherwise she'd have to task yet another damn domestic account for 'beer acquisitions'.

She should tell Bjǫrn in person. Just anticipating the face he'd make at her for telling him to start it and fund the damn idea was entertaining, actually doing so should be better… oh wait no. She was trying to be nicer to her Lackey…

…once more. Then she'd stop abusing him.

Being either perpetually buzzed or tipsy should keep Verde out of trouble as well, why the man thought reading her notebook was remotely a good idea was completely beyond her… but didn't excessive alcohol make one think stupid ideas were good?

That wouldn't keep the man out of mischief then. He'd probably do more questionable shit if she kept him drunk all the time. Fuck… it had been a decent idea.

"I believe," the man in question allowed slowly as he examined the level of stout left in the glass mug before his spot at the table, "we are permitted to leave at any time deemed suitable as we need. If you would appreciate it more, we can take our leave. I have spoken to all those I might wish for the time being, and you do not seem too interested in conversing with the others on your own."

It was what, eleven?

No, slightly past midnight according to her watch. Sonya slowly lowered her wrist, while that did make her feel better about maybe taking him up on that offer she knew full well if she didn't stay up until about three in the morning she'd have a seriously strange sleeping schedule the entire whatever this was fucking supposed to be.

"Are you tired?" The man just shrugged, which did not remotely help her any. "If I try to sleep now I'm going to spend the rest of the weekend sleeping in through the mornings…"

"Aside the final day, the next two mornings will be filled with functions and lectures on the topics we are to familiarize ourselves with in aims of perhaps solving known or discovered complications utilizing our own skills and areas of expertise. Unless one interests you, I do not see what limitation that imposes." Pausing only to drain his latest and seventeenth mug of beer, Verde leaned back in his dining chair to glance sideways at her somewhat curiously. "Do any interest you? The exotic nature of your specialties may prove to be of fascinating note when applied to some specific topics."

"I don't believe I ever heard of 'history' being described as 'exotic' before." Someone they both apparently recognized spoke up behind their table, and leaning backwards the Storm-Cloud eyed the older guy from that first meeting she had extracted Verde out of as he picked his way even closer to them. "Although I am also required to clarify some of those lectures are of topics we have deemed 'sensitive' in nature, I do not think one or two more would harm anything for more broad topics."

"Monsieur Bisset." Verde greeted for them both, thankfully given she had completely blanked out even if it had been just hours since he introduced himself to her.

The elder scientist guy slid into an abandoned seat across from them, given the restaurant was exactly that and Verde had a plus one they had a square table to themselves to retreat to when their apparently excessively limited capacity for social chitchat had been reached… that seat actually belonged to the next table over. "I was wondering if I may have a moment of your time, before you two wander off as many of our couples already have."

Sonya was slightly tempted to tell him no, just to see what he did when he already invited himself to
join their table. Recognizing the impulse as rude as hell didn't exactly stop the temptation, which probably made it a good thing her 'date' for the night was the one to gesture the man to speak freely.

"As one of the ones to manage invitations to our little corner of the institute I am admittedly not remotely upset you found yourself armed with one of our invitations, young monsieur Verninac. However, I cannot and could not recall approving it."

Verde very nearly froze like a guilty asshole, but she snorted softly and pinched him in the thigh under the table before he could open his mouth. "As interesting as clerical errors are, we got the invitation some time ago. There was more than enough time, between confirmation of reception and our attendance, for you to have corrected it if we are in fact imposing."

"Very true. And again, I am not remotely upset nor indeed against having Verninac as part of our organization. In fact, I am delighted." Beaming, but finding nothing particularly receptive between either of them so it faded quickly, he coughed only slightly sheepishly before continuing. "There is still the issue of the trouble you came up against while studying in the States, my young friend. While there is no legal nor government contention about your involvement… there is still the issue of it occurring at all."

"Hence the bodyguards." Sonya pointed out dryly, curious of where the hell he was trying to go with all this.

He simply nodded in response first. "A more than understandable precaution. However, that still does not in fact address certain concerns."

"Aside taking precautions, understandable or otherwise," Verde suddenly spoke up for himself after a moment of her being too slow to respond, "what else would be possible? Any concern is in fact impossible to fully address, neither I nor you can predict the future an all complication therein. I could have refused the opportunity and remained in a secured laboratory for the duration of the summit, it was an option. Alas, as the realities of the situation was pointed out to me, that will not address much you are concerned by and in fact be limiting myself unduly out of misplaced concerns of possibility alone."

Bisset blinked twice, apparently needing a moment like most normal humans to parse through the Lightning's overly complicated sentences, before tipping another nod. "Well thought out, I suppose I can respect that. Well, as fascinating as it might be to keep you both here when you were discussing if you might leave… I suppose I should leave you two here."

…a scientist with social-savvy.

In the one she didn't nearly outright own. Great.

Verde harrumphed somewhat irritably, scowling more thoughtfully than with intent when she glanced over.

"Are we calling it a night?"

"Yes." Casting a somewhat annoyed look at his empty beer mug, he rose to his feet and politely held out a hand for her to do the same. "Are you intending on collecting Alek from Hawk before-"

"Yeah. He'll eat the doors if I'm not there when he wakes up."

Verde's green eyebrows rose up sharply. "I do not believe the concierge, nor the housekeepers, will appreciate that happening."
"No shit, Sherlock."
Chapter 30

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Snapping awake as there was a significant change in her surroundings, Sonya blinked somewhat groggily up at Verde. He didn't look all that happy to be awake either, standing in their dimly lit hotel room blearily scowling back at her behind those coke-bottle glasses for some reason.

Why were all the men she associated with so much taller than her?

She was fucking one hundred and sixty-seven centimeters, five and a solid half feet tall, perfectly fucking normal-sized. Her mother was this size, Tatiana was only a reasonable two centimeters taller, Nilda and Fiorella were similar within five centimeters themselves… but no. Arseniy was taller than his lover by a good ten centimeters, Renato had been taller than her by at least fifteen if not more, fucking Tyr was somewhere about twenty… fuck's sake, Fong was about her father's height along with Cherep and Verde somewhere in the realm of ten-fifteen over her themselves.

Only Silvano and Timoteo were suitably matched height-wise with their significant others, and she fucking hated one of them. Mr. Silvery-White at least was a decent sort, kind of.

She was getting damn tired of earning herself a crick in her neck looking up at all the men who were for some reason over a hundred and seventy-five centimeters tall. They could all due with some height reduction, in her ever so humble opinion. "What?"

"…why have you chosen to seek respite positioned such in a chair of all available furniture?"

"Why not?" Sonya tossed back indifferently, testing how well her limbs had survived several hours in her awkward positioning and untucking her heels from under her ass to put her feet on the floor. "The desk wouldn't have been nearly as comfortable, even if I could then lay down."

Aside her thighs being cold, because Verde wasn't meaty enough to need a whole lot of material in his suit jacket to prevent gaps chilling them, the only real issue of spending the night where she had was the crick in her neck. And her back, her spine wasn't all that much of a fan of the times she slept sitting upright anyways.

…and her ass had gone numb, but her moving had woken all the nerves asleep there. Fantastic, she was again her own pain in her ass.

Not particularly strange for her, given nine times out of ten if her heists went on for more than three hours she was catching a nap somewhere. It never did feel any better than the last time and sleeping upright always made her groggier than she would be otherwise.

Next time, she was using her own coats. She at least knew how to mostly avoid the chilled thighs/hips issue under them, she just hoped against reason that the scientist's more formal shit had been bought before he lost all that weight… which was not in fact the case. Stupid stick-man with the biggest brain…

Although the man in question looked a little constipated right now, he did reflexively hold out a hand for her to use to stabilize herself when she tried putting weight on top of her feet. Likely without adequate thought, it was either the middle of the fucking night or just before dawn and while she could hear the plumbing running to explain why he was awake right now… neither of them probably
had enough sleep to feel like being socially inclined at all.

Speaking of… "Why did you wake me up?"

"For what reason would you eschew the provided-"

"Verde, simply state your inquiry."

The puzzled, if irritable, tilt to his features went utterly flat with total annoyance. "Why, are, you, here, not, in, bed?"

Sonya pointedly extracted her hand from his, even if that made her stance a bit unstable with her current physical issues niggling at her legs now she was semi-upright, and placed her palm against his bare chest. Verde flinched backwards as her fingertips grazed cooled skin but hesitated as he registered her unsurprised expression. "Because you're not okay with me invading your personal space like that."

"…I am moderately certain that your suggested situation, and indeed the one we are in, is backwards." He countered as irritably as he looked when she was working on getting the feeling back in her feet by shuffling them on the somewhat stiff carpets, they just started to give that insistent pins-and-needles feeling back that made her wish they were still as numb as her ass and while movement might not help it was better than just doing nothing. "I am the elder between us, if one should decide to eschew utilizing the provided accommodations for the benefit or comfort of the other such should then be I."

After taking the required fifteen seconds to work out what the bloody hell he meant to say rather than get caught on all the frills the man absolutely had to use for whatever reason, she snorted and put forth the effort to at least straighten up and look full at him this time since it seemed he had a serious wrench mucking things up in that overly complex brain of his. "I'm the senior experienced individual here given the more immediate concern is your safety, and you've got social shit to do that will require you to be fully rested to pick up on anything concerning in the moment. I'm general oversight, I get to take naps instead."

Something darkly frustrated flicked across the Lightning's face almost too quick for her to catch, which wasn't helped by the throw-away gesture he paired whatever that frustration was meant to express in him that drew the eye more. "By age, I have seen a half decade more of life than you. What instructions I have received in the subject of human interactions states that the elder, one older than another, should be the one minding the comfort and health of the younger if there is a need."

"I'm fully aware of what 'I'm older than you' means, thank you." She shot back tartly, absently patting Alek's head as he raised it from the contested bedspread curiously for their noisy distraction during what was normally 'sleeping-time' to him. "My mother instructed us it was based off 'utility', not age. You have a reason to need a full night's rest, I don't and can get more at times you can't therefore you get the disputed accommodations."

"The accommodations are not in fact disputed, you have simply chosen to eschew them for substandard substitution for reasons not entirely apparent. Even taking into account your etiquette training has differed from my own, I."

"Wait. Did… do you mean you had specific training to interact with another person?" She knew it happened and all that, but… the most Lisa had done for them was acting lessons. Well, more manipulation than acting if she was going to be honest. "You can't do it naturally either?"

Verde picked to outright glower at her nastily instead of answer, which she figured was enough of
one to count anyways.

"...fuck. Well... no, fuck." She couldn't use him as a measuring stick then, his understanding of people was based off someone else's understanding. Which wasn't necessarily a problem, but only applicable in the very specific situations he was then taught about in the first place.

...which would also explain a bit of how weirdly jumpy he had then been around her. Verde was okay with her holding his arm, but not okay with her placing her palm against his chest. Okay with her holding his hand, but not with her hip-to-hip next to him.

In short, he wasn't adaptable enough to go with the flow when another person was brought into the situation. When it matched up with what he knew he was entirely okay, but the moment she went outside of it...

So she needed to ensure he was fully informed of and expectant of her antics, that way he wouldn't react so damn poorly to her and possibly compromise the lie. "Fuck, Verde, you should've told me that."

Weirdly, he now eyed her cautiously and started leaning backwards slightly.

"No, seriously. There's hints and leading phrases I can do or say so you'll know what's coming beforehand, but I didn't think you needed almost specifically plotted out situations to react to. Most people can just roll with it, but if you'd need a different approach...? I can do it, and that you didn't inform me means I've... well, fucked with your head unnecessarily."

She probably should've guessed... but Adrik didn't seem to have any issues wrangling the scientist around. Not to say Verde was a social, gawky, and grumpy butterfly fluttering about. She figured he would and indeed was perfectly content to tinker in his labs until the world ended on him, but at least one person she knew of had no major issues getting him to pay attention to them.

"Fuck's sake..." Sonya flopped backwards onto the foot of the bed, this time not on Alek to avoid getting a face-full of doggy tongue as he kept assuming she was playing with him when she did that.

"...my apologies." Verde tentatively offered, sounding so dubious she snorted in response. "How have you come to this conclusion? From all references I have consulted, experience and plainly practice in the various situations were the only-"

"We're faking it, so I can put everything to a script for you to follow." It would be a tiny bit wooden, and while she had to generalize the plans for only specific events or happenings that meant not everything could be something he would be informed of... "It won't be a good learning experience or anything remotely like that, and anything that goes off the script will obviously be hard to adapt the scenarios to, but you'll be aware of what's going on and able to anticipate most of it."

"That would be greatly preferable." He informed her needlessly, still far enough away so she couldn't see what kind of expression he might be making as he processed all that, but he didn't sound irritated she was doubting his social skills to his face so there was that at least. "I presume such instruction should take place immediately instead of at a later undefined time?"

"You would presume correctly." Her spine decided to finally get into the 'complaining' thing the entirety of her lower body was already well into, twinging painfully as it decompressed from several hours of sleeping upright. "Are you up for any reason, aside just to wake me up too?"

"There is an optional breakfast available for attendees of the summit, with the conditions of listening to the more CECAM-orientated pitches and recruitment efforts in the aims of eliciting more effort
and contributions in their desired aims by their gathered guests. I presumed, with at least one aware of the dubious nature of the invitation extended to myself, I should—"

"Yeah okay. When does it end?"

"...undefined. Attendees are only requested to attend one of the panels, otherwise—"

"What's after it?"

A pointedly aggravating sigh. "The panel of guest lectures and seminars, slated to begin at one and continue until or about seven or eight this evening depending on... factors..."

Sonya rolled over and crawled up the bedspread for the alarm clock set on one of the bedside tables. It was, exactly, six-fifteen in the morning.

...he woke up, without help by anything other than his body's needs, almost exactly at six. What the fuck, Verde?

Luck, it had to be luck. There was a little suspicious tinge of 'no it wasn't' from her mostly forgotten life before where she had been a college student once too, but really. It was luck and nothing else would remotely convince her otherwise.

"I'll come fetch you at um... eight. Eight-fifteen at the latest. Civilians won't really have enough supplied for a Flame user's metabolic rates, especially not for free, so we'll get breakfast afterwards too."

"...I beg your pardon?" Verde suddenly, and rather irritably, demanded thunderously. Risking a look over her shoulder revealed that yeah, he was phenomenally not happy with something. "Do you mean to imply what is normally thought of as a full meal is in fact not acceptable—"

"I'm pretty sure I told you that, before." Didn't she?

...oh, no. She told Fiorella recently, not Verde.

"...shit." Sonya rolled back around and sat upright, still with the alarm clock in her hands.

"Did anyone go through Flame-caloric charts and or needs with you? Tats was with us all summer, didn't you notice how much she ate trying to keep Fiorella healthy?"

From the absolutely insulted expression on his face, she actually now doubted it. Giving it some actual thought, Verde was always tinkering in his labs or very studiously elsewhere when there was a full meal available... he would've missed a lot of the causal conversations she had with Fiorella about the subject or even just getting an eyeful of what a routinely healing Sun required.

"Fuck. You need to eat more than your previous 'baseline', Verde. Like, so much more. All those Flames, and you're a phenomenally strong Lightning to boot, come from somewhere specific not 'magically'. The same place as where you'd get the energy to merely exist, from what you'd eat over a day, so the moment you popped with Flames your caloric needs basically skyrocketed into the stratosphere. That's why you've been losing so much weight, what would've been good enough before is not remotely approaching acceptable now."

There was almost an audible click as the scientist then realized how his health had been negatively impacted by that oversight... oh no, that was the clock in her hands ticking over another minute not his brain. She discarded the clock to the floor somewhat hastily, rolling up and off the bedspread to try to impress this topic into his mind because he was legitimately starving to death while still eating.
"Lightnings are calorically efficient, not so much as a Cloud can be but more than any regular Rain or Storm. The more Flames you use per day should dictate how much you then should eat beyond what your new baseline is, by a rate of... fuck... I don't recall Lightnings' rates off the top of my head... I need to eat about a full potato with cheese and whatnot for every weapon I pop into existence and sustain for a full hour's use. If I use sixty, for every minute of existence. Generally it helps if I instead go for empty calories, we all tend to buy or keep a stash of hard candies on us or go out drinking heavily somewhere to make up emergency needs after the moment... or just eat more the next day. You probably need about a potato with the fixings for half an hour of Hardened skin... or it might be two hours, I don't honestly recall."

"...there are charts?" Inquired the man absently, way too internally focused trying to make something out of her entirely inadequate comparison to fit into his current weight-issue than paying attention to her fully.

"I'll call my sister and get your 'ratios', but the baseline should be whatever is needed to sustain your weight over a low-Flame intensive month. I don't... you probably don't know it, so that'll have to be nailed down later... fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck."

Verde surprisingly reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders, from the look on his face somewhat vexed and focused more on his mental calculations still but at least not at her. "Adrik instructed me in the basics of the skill, that he was not aware of any new or altered dietary requirements in any Flame users at all it is not astounding as he does not require the information. Your faith in his competence is not a mark of personal failure, merely an oversight. It has been identified before excessive harm was caused, I will adjust as needed instead of assuming the inadequate levels of before still apply."

"...excessive? Verde, you're a fucking stick-man!" If she had just put two seconds more thought into why his absent eating habits might not be the damn problem when he had been losing so much weight... "Most that gain Flames are about teenage or younger in age, which means they're eating more anyways to do their growing with so odds tend to be they eat enough for their additional needs by the time they stop growing and just go from there. You popped in your mid-twenties, so you stopped adjusting how much you ate and didn't-"

The man, gently, shook her. Pointedly. Like twice, but the fact Sonya had never been gripped by the shoulders and shaken made her shut up and give him a weird look in return.

"We have the underlying oversight on a trouble topic, the correction needed to apply now, and the amendment will be continued going forward to solve the lingering problem we both addressed incorrectly." Verde stressed pointedly, releasing her shoulders awkwardly and just leaving his hands to hover there with almost palpable hesitance. "I appreciate your clarification, however late, and while noting and preventing the oversight from being applied erroneously to subsequent situations is important... panic will not aid any aim whatsoever. Clarity and forethought are necessary for comprehensively addressing the issue in the near or far future."

"...I'm going to start fining you for your mouth." She countered irritably, deciding she did not like being shaken by her shoulders just because she said so. "Every time you say something you could've said with fifteen words less, I'm stealing at least ten or so euros out of your pocket."

He dropped his hands to hang by his sides finally, shrugging rather dismissively. "It is still all your funds that you pay me, stealing back such a minor amount of currency would not greatly impact anything. Likely, I suspect, you would return the funds if and when the lack may become an issue."
That was rather annoying, and assuming a great deal. She probably would return the cash if he needed it for… say… *food*, but not for a whole lot else.

He could figure that out for himself, and the fact she really wasn't that nice overall, because she did not remotely feel charitable after he shook her like that.

"If you, who is probably the smartest man I've ever met, couldn't figure out you needed to eat more than your usual over a couple months' worth of experience… how many others popped with their Flames late and didn't realize they were slowly starving to death?"

Verde, very tellingly, didn't comment.

"Eight-thirty, at the latest. Probably. I'll have what Tats knows about Lightning-specific metabolic rates by then, even if I have to get mom to wake her up to get it." They were… what?

Two hours behind her?

Tatiana should also be on a schooling centric sleeping schedule, even if it was the weekend. Her sister wouldn't mind, after the fact, with the issue this dire… but it was a good thing explaining why she was waking the redhead up so early would need to be done over a phone line instead of in person. Or she could call Galina, but the Lightning woman would've memorized her needs and not just any general Lightnings' and she'd probably have to guess for Verde's generalized rates.

"I will ensure to be positioned optimally for such needs, up to and including emergency leave taking if there becomes an issue greater than what we have identified already." Promised the scientist, glancing down and belatedly realizing he went through the entire conversation without a shirt so he then started to look for something to dress himself in as he probably had been intending to before he woke her up. "Would you like to attend the breakfast with me, or do you have other intents for the next few hours?"

Sonya stretched out back across the bed, slid five francs out of the billfold of his wallet set on the end table she got the alarm clock from, and sat back up while tucking the paper bill behind Alek's collar for safe keeping before the man could notice she did it. "*You can tell everyone I slept in a bit. I've got more than just my sister to call."

As he wandered around getting ready for the day, she instead petted her canine's ears and tried to ignore the headache from too little sleep heaped on top of something stressful settling into her temples. Alek was not fooled by seductive pets, he shuffled and wiggled around until she had half her good boy sprawled across her lap for comfort.

Bonus lap rug of fur to help warm her up.

She was always half-surprised Alek knew full well when she wasn't feeling happy with anything, and that he cared enough to try cheering her up with his sheer fuzziness. She vaguely in a not-really way recalled canines should be able to outright *scent* stress, and petting animal fur was therapeutic, so she tried to just really appreciate him when he did things like this.

Verde suddenly returned to the bedroom, still bare chested, brandishing a foamy toothbrush in her face. "*You have still not adequately explained why it is you have eschewed sleeping in the furniture specifically rented for a limited time in order to obtain rest comfortably far from one's residence.*"

Yeah, actually. She was pretty sure she had. "*Because you're not comfortable with me close enough to share a bed, much less standing closer to you than socially acceptable for boss-subordinate relationships?*"
"We have already addressed the unfamiliarity I have for such behaviors, and you have obtained a plan of action to redress the balance for the comfort of us both. Such is no longer an acceptable explanation for making yourself uncomfortable for my sake when the alternative is suitable in both our opinions."

…okay then. "If it bothers you so much, I'll sleep with you tonight. Just don't be surprised when you wake up half wrapped around me or vise versa, I've got a higher internal temp than most humans therefore if you get even a tiny bit cold you'll end up right next to me."

He visibly stalled out for a second, opting to fidget with his toothbrush as his brain cranked away on whatever monkey wrench he had gumming it up now. Alek was interested in sticking his nose into the off-green foam being waved about and either snorting or licking, because he wasn't familiar with human tooth care or the products use for it and preventing that disaster took pinning her canine in place with one arm.

"…very well." He eventually, rather stiffly, accepted before hastily wandering back into the bathroom to finish his morning routine.

"I wouldn't look so smug if I were you." Sonya advised Alek, who beat his fluffy tail against her side and just remained looking insufferably smug and snuggly. "You wanted to lick his toothpaste, so you're not all that bright either."

Her dog did not remotely give a fuck, nuzzling into her palm for more pets.

…that reminded her. She stopped petting him, something close to a war crime in his oh so humble opinion from the sound of the whine he then gave, and leaned backwards across the bed to steal yet another five francs out of Verde's wallet before he came back to collect it.

Because yes, she was that petty. More books for her.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Occasionally, Nilda could let herself into certain select buildings up and down the Italian peninsula. It wasn't so much a point of pride as a frequent happening she had become accustomed to, because sometimes she just needed one tiny bit of information to rule out any suspicions in equally select directions and sometimes it was best that the owners of said places never realized she had walked into them.

It was just the places that employed Mists that foiled that usual happening. Always, every damn time.

"Attentive as always, Mirror Lady." She greeted the young lady that pulled open the front doors before she could lay a finger on the recently polished brass hardware, polite smile becoming a bit fixed at the mischievously sly smirk the younger girl was wearing as the heavy door revealed her fully.

"Prompt as always… Mrs. Silvery-White."

Her baby cousin by marriage behind her snorted, and Nilda couldn't really respond as the Mist then took herself off now that neither of them could however politely ignore they were now invited in and subsequently were guests.

Come Hell or high water, she was going to eventually stamp out that damn nickname. Silvano might
not remotely mind, the nickname was not entirely odd given a Cloud's usual irreverence to social norms when not specifically trained up to heed them however strange he must find it to be tacked on to her reputation instead of judged on his own merit, but she was finding it to be even more objectionable as the days passed.

Obviously Sonya recalled her name, despite never really using it. She never had to spend a moment trying to recall who 'Nilda' was when Fiorella mentioned her name, and had passed on her full maiden and married name to her staff in case of logistical issues. The same logistical issues that had her bringing Silvano's baby cousin, who would make a truly awful Mafioso, here to include in.

"...Mrs. Silvery-White?" Palaemon inquired softly behind her back.

"Silvano is known as Mr. Silvery-White. Try not to take offense." Nilda drawled as she stepped inside Death Castle.

Despite being briefed rather extensively on the mistress of the castle's habits and a bit on why it was named such, the young man following her rubbernecked at just about everything. The bookcases along every other wall, the rather airy and inviting sitting rooms they passed by, the view out of the dinning halls' windows, skipping right over the skull-bowl shelf in the supposedly clinically clean double kitchen.

Suspicions proved, but she was still rather irked she overlooked the entire shelf in the beginning. Nilda could not make situational judgements on how secured or civilian-friendly some location was when she could not observe the location fully in the first place.

"Mrs. Tolmachyova." The dark green haired woman glanced over a shoulder, humming an accent instead of taking her hands out of the bowl of dough she was kneading. "I have a candidate for you."

"Well... let's see him." Whisking a towel, somewhat thinner than a hand towel and that was the limits of Nilda's domestic familiarity right there, off the handle of the oven hanging just at her hip the woman covered the dough and left it on the counter before turning around. "He has to be better than a lay-a-bout and a mole."

As far as Nilda was aware, the initial offer of staff that particular staffing agency tended to give newcomers or unknown syndicates asking for domestic workers tended to be rather... not good. Ineffectual, generally lazy, and often borderline stupid. Just simply to see if they were risking the lives of their decently trained and networked staff members, before they had to risk them at the whims of criminals and possibly lethally short attention spans.

'Lay-a-bout' was likely apt, more so than the woman knew.

The second one, if a group returned their 'lazy sot' in good condition and without any unnecessary mental scars, should've been at least mostly as requested.

A mole was very interesting. Not particularly surprising, but interesting. What kind of mole?

To get past that agency's background screening, especially as they could be ever so through with illegal options more than any purely law-abiding outfit could... hmm...

A concerted investigation effort into Mafia circles, likely. Whoever it was could not have been law enforcement, or related to one, to have been offered for a household with young Flame users about. That just simply didn't happen, or at least it shouldn't.

Something foul was afoot, and while very interested she would investigate such claims later.
"This is Palaemon Arcaro, not exactly trained to be a butler but he can more than hold down a footman's position while you decide if you wish to go through the rigmarole of training him up to be one for you." Silvano's third-cousin once removed, from a branch of the family that decided to mostly hold down the business side of the *famiglia* rather than the criminal.

It was just this young man was an atrocious liar, about *everyone* saw through him when he tried.

It wasn't necessarily a bad trait to have in certain positions, just one he couldn't deal with when lying to port authorities where his ship had come from and just what might be excluded in the manifest for the cargo. There were a couple civilian-safe ships like that, she knew full well... but not many and most had the full crew needed already without any openings Palaemon might make use of.

Nilda hadn't *expressly* recruited him for the job of 'Vongola Alliance Agent for Death Castle', and frankly until she could speak to Sonya about the situation she still hadn't, but if it worked out that way... well. Everyone, including his mother with the high-pitched voice she could overhear three rooms removed, would be very happy.

Palaemon sheepishly waved slightly to the motherly housekeeper, who did not seem very impressed as she cleaned her hands of excess flour with a wetted washcloth.

"Well. I suppose this is the best we're going to get, isn't it?" Ruslana observed more than a little tartly, entirely excusable because the Rain *had* shorted them on what they needed for her own aims and that would make it three times they had come up short. "*All hires are pending approval of the mistress of the castle, but until such a time she can make that decision I am at liberty to offer a room on the fourth floor for your own use while we see about if we can use you.*"

Her cousin-by-marriage, who had been half-raised on the sea when he didn't have school or other necessities to deal with, at least didn't quail under the stern gaze of a foreign woman. She knew any number of his uncles on that side of the family, who were all about forty-fifty with the years at sea to qualify for 'grizzled sea dogs', would've exiled him to work exclusively with their ships' chefs if he had dared done anything like that.

He hitched a shoulder in acceptance instead, in that lackadaisical way those that grew up battling the whims of the sea tended to have for anything happening on land-locked areas.

"*Furthermore.*" Continued the woman with some decent unforgiving tones added to her voice as she planted her hands on her hips. "**All unknowns are at the mercy of search by our Mists until we deem otherwise. And I mean 'we', Italian Mafioso and Russian residents alike.**"

...well, shit.

"*Is that really necessary?*

"*Bazanova said so. You can contend with her about it.*" She glanced past her at the teenager before leaving them alone in the large kitchen. "*Just don't be stupid. Excuse me, I need to get the employment contracts.*"

"*Last chance to back out.*" Nilda advised Silvano's cousin pointedly, turning around to just be extra sure he would be picking to stay here of his own free will.

They could use someone here to give warnings out when Sonya was in residence or not to certain groups that held other Clouds and such, but he was family and didn't have to do this for them.

Palaemon gave her a pointedly grim smirk back, hands in the pockets of his slacks and just generally waiting everything out like a good young man. "*It's far enough away from my mother I can get*
away with only visiting when my brothers do. Besides, the sea's just out that way here just like back home."

"Smart boy." While being monitored could be nothing but an invasion of privacy, especially done by Mists who generally didn't tend to obey any kind of personal boundaries another might have as a rule... one didn't exactly have much personal privacy on shipboard.

She had toured a couple of them by now, those damn things had about four men to a tiny cabin if you were lucky. Otherwise there were those dorm rooms...

"We are not that far away, if you have any issues I would rather hear about it with enough time to do something instead of be informed by Sonya after the fact. With her people, just with living on shore for so long, whatever."

"Sure."

Nilda eyed the young man pointedly. "You're going to buy yourself a sailboat the moment you can, aren't you?"

"...well, yeah."

"We actually have one, although you might need to... de-'web' it a bit." Ruslana paused in the open doorway to the dinning hall, looking faintly puzzled as she absently glanced over three pages of professionally printed out documents in her hands. "There is no way that should've made sense... Bazanova kept it, instead of having it disposed of. I believe the... Todds? One of them, owned it before he decided to irk the boss something fierce."

Probably not one obtained from the Superbi preferred shipyards, but anything to keep the young man from getting into debt to the just that side of wrong people for a fix. "Why would it be laced in cobwebs enough to need specific removal? Sonya's only been down here a few months... surely no matter how spider-infested a storage location is, not too much damage could be done by now."

The woman gave her a pointedly disbelieving look, handing the supposed contracts over to young Palaemon. "Have you met Pavuchky, Lady Superbi?"

"Have I met who...? Oh, dear, God." There was a massive, multi-colored, bulbous spider suddenly on one of the kitchens' window. Big enough to see all eight of its pitch black, fixed eyes clearly and get a good view of the thing's... mouth.

It was very pointedly cleaning one of those red as Storm Flames fang-tipped... mouth-legs as they watched.

...that was disgusting. What exotic monstrosity even got that large?

Turning to the young man, who was well-trained enough to only show a modicum of surprise himself, Sonya's housekeeper smiled politely. "Do not wander the grounds at night. He hunts then."

"...sure." Agreed the teenager promptly, not reading his contracts in favor of smartly keeping one eye on the arachnid lurking on a window instead of the windowsill. "I can do that."

The supposed 'Pavuchky' skittered a little to one side, diving into the reflection on glass cast by strong sunlight on its underside to return from whatever little corner of hell it occupied until needed again. Nilda forcibly relaxed her shoulders, trying not to wonder just where that thing was kept around here and how close it might've been all those times she and Fiorella visited for the Lady Vongola's dancing lessons.
"He is the Mirror Lady's companion. She will be most upset if anything happened to her 'darling'."

Ruslana continued rather unforgivingly, checking on the ingredients she had laid out but not the bowl of dough she had out too.

Nilda pointedly shot a look at the teenager to ensure he fully understood the danger and was going to be alright under that kind of pressure, but apparently Silvano's cousin was well-informed enough to at least guess her general point given he not only met her eyes but agreed wordlessly with a firm nod.

Get into the good side of the equally teenaged Anna, and the boy might just luck out in not seeing that monster again.

Well. Enlightening, grotesque, and possibly useful.

Just another visit to Death Castle, honestly.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970 continued. Salon de Marvejol, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Tapping the pencil's eraser against the dining table set in this banquet hall, Verde set his chin on one upraised hand and critically examined the formulas he had laboriously written out across seven sheets of paper from memory to ensure he had recalled them all correctly.

It wasn't rude, they were in intermission for the nonce while the speakers took a break and the attendees saw to their personal needs.

The problem with his preparation to add in the information nurse Primakova might supply him on the metabolic rates of Lightning Flame users was that the calculations Nicolas Clément-Desormes discovered for how much energy a Calorie contained was calculated off a piece of coal. Not the human body, which with the variations within could wildly differ in efficiency due to what was known as one's metabolic rate.

Some individuals were simply more efficient, some were simply less so. By nature, much less then modified by easily or tricky food items to consume or process for clean calculation.

Likewise, construing how much Caloric energy a food item might contain was similarly assumed from averages and did not in fact account for how messy and inaccurate the human body was at the process of digestion. Nor how much was simply lost as waste once processed incorrectly.

Often, suggested caloric counts were somewhat to excessively lower than in reality.

Furthermore, Lightning Flames could be measured in nominal electromotive terms. It begged for the measurements of output for his daily caloric needs to follow suit, however then Verde needed the internal resistance of the human body… more specifically his own, to make those formulas to work. Voltage and current were both cut by resistance of the channeling material, flesh and bone alike, and while he could possibly calculate out how much voltage the human body required to run with enough data…

Likely such could possibly be drawn from experiments in the early days of electric run utilities, or unfortunate accidents in the maintenance of, for this moment he simply did not have that information and as such that suspicion was regulated to theory.

Guesswork was not a particularly satisfying method of correcting oversights or miscalculations; however, he did at least have one critical piece of information. His rates as it stood were critically
Verde distractedly glanced at his hand holding his writing utensil, boney and thin as it might be naturally before the advent of his Flames… the prominent ridge of the ulna below his wrist visually indicated a far too little body fat index for anyone's comfort.

While admittedly galling, being instructed to eat more as if he was not in fact a full adult and could realize the situation himself even if he was likely to lose track of time and miss general meal times, paired with the information Sonya had rather hastily listed out for him this morning he found that in review the incidents held more intrinsic depth to them than simply irritating nagging. More as 'your intake is not sufficient, increase it' than 'you cannot care for your own self adequately'.

He also appreciated the incidents in review, far away from the moments in question and armed with the basics of the required information to understand the motivation behind such bothering occurrences. If he held no value to his boss, she would've likely not bothered to inform him what level of caloric consumption he had was in fact not sufficient. On the assumption he was aware of the information that required that level of guesswork to address or that he was just not particularly concerned by the same or not.

…annoyingly frequent happening, but understandable and therefore forgivable.

The oversight was not her fault, she had trusted Adrik to instruct him the best he could with additions from Galina when a question was raised that the other man could not answer. To the extent of arranging a formal situation of instruction the entire Mafia would then respect the limitations of, in order to protect them both equally from the consequences of requiring an extraction from a previous objectionable situation and for not just the Russian man's health.

That Adrik was not in fact adequate to instruct someone on the pitfalls and drawbacks to go with the abilities possessing Dying Will Flames imparted was not his fault at all, as he hadn't set out with the intentions of being such an individual therefore his adaptation in the moment leading to the oversight made such understandable. Galina's additions were through and comprehensive… however she could only address what she was adequately informed might be an inquiry in need of clarification and it seemed neither of them desired to spend overly long reviewing already situated basics of their type if not specifically raised as an inquiry.

Verde tapped the fingertips he had been contemplating on the table, returning to eyeing the formulas written out before him somewhat irritably.

It was not, in fact, actually possible to calculate out one's exact caloric needs. He had only the formula generalizations to estimate the numbers, such as the Harris-Benedict principle, and the remainder would need to be left up to equally generalized estimations on energy expenditures to run the basic functions of the human body at rest much less when standing or walking anywhere.

Understandably lacking were any calculations on how much one needed in calories to sustain any measure of Dying Will Flame expression. 'Caloric rates' were a piss-poor substitution, however if that was all he could obtain then he would not protest.

Sonya informed him his basic needs should be the required amounts to maintain a healthy weight over a time period of a month. Obviously, given his state as he was in this moment, the rate had very notably changed from when he in fact did not believe he could drop five hundred thousand volts from his hands and knock out another human individual on demand.

That any use of Flames required an additional intake of 'empty calories', an interesting term but one he could understand given the examples of alcohol or excessively sweet sugar confections to then
make up for the usage, should have been a reasonable assumption that he was not certain how he overlooked. He should not require more substance or elements in his diet beyond what the human body required to replace certain cells or lubricate his joints, merely the base fuel to possibly run his own lab equipment via Lightning Flames without possibly poisoning himself with too much magnesium or zinc in the process.

…Sonya would not be able to calculate out her own needs within any reasonable accuracy, as her Flames did not have a characteristic of 'like electricity' for his calculations to also apply for her. 'More efficient' than his own 'rates' would mean she required less. Not exactly how much less, just less.

Neither would Shamal, Mingxia, Hawk, nor even Larion. If a Cloud had a different caloric burn rate than a Lightning, so too would a Rain and a Storm from each as well as one another. Therefore what information he would then be given would be significantly changed from what another Dying Will Flame user would need to even begin to address their own requirements. If he could in fact use Ohm's Law to calculate out his own needs down to almost exact counts, he could not transfer the work to apply to another's different type of Flame.

Verde found this less than acceptable.

While Sonya had several other Flame types at hand in her home, she did not have an adequate number for any comprehensive sample size in any expression. The only one he knew of who would have access to an adequate, or otherwise, sample size of Flame users would be an entire syndicate of Mafia thugs he had put forth more effort in avoiding than most would likely bother with. For personal reasons, and to eliminate the outstanding variables that would likely not be appreciated by such organizations.

…and Tatiana Primakova. As a Mafia Land nurse at St. Julian's, she likely met and forgot more potential test subjects than Verde could remotely contact for possibly unpaid volunteer work as merely an independent researcher for one Cloud.

While he was theoretically expecting her arrival, Sonya also slid some sheaf of papers before him containing the information she promised to obtain from her sister at the same time she took the seat directly next to him. Which was arguably more important than her presence when she informed him she would be arriving.

He didn't require two hands to read the formulas Primakova thought to include, especially not to guestimate how to adjust his daily habits to redress the current nagging problem he was experiencing, so her use of one arm for some aim without releasing it wasn't particularly noteworthy to him.

However, it was particularly noteworthy to the man who had previously been seated next to him upon his return from speaking with some other individual in the conference room.

"Verminac, what's this?"

"Clarify." Verde demanded somewhat irritably without looking up, still memorizing the information Tatiana had provided because there were indeed suspiciously cryptic shorthand Sonya had included to replace the terms 'Dying Will Flames' and 'Lightnings' that made it clear the pages would likely be disposed of the moment he indicated he was satisfied.

He could include it, or at least appropriate references without any possibly incriminating terms, into his calculations in a few minutes. More than likely mentally, they were not difficult calculations and when they were as generalized as for an adult male of his pre-Dying Will Flame able state and height instead of personalized exact figures would not be greatly more accurate to work out fully.
"…why are you here, chickadee? It's not like-"

"Yeah, stop there. You'll seem like less of a general asshole overall." Sonya advised him shortly, neither sounding impressed nor very interested somewhat closer to his ear than he had expected. "I'm just here to deliver something he wanted, so… relax. Or whatever."

…and breakfast. As she claimed, and the figures before him substantiated, any respectable plate of food most would consider a full meal would be merely half or less of what an active Dying Will Flame user required to eat per meal to just exist. Which he had reliably failed to meet the last three months alone, much less in the last half year, so his refrain from utilizing his Flames as habit was likely not a factor to account for in the next few days.

Once his body had finished cannibalizing his body's fat content, a stage which he had not progressed past yet as he was consuming something to counter the rate it was depleted, his muscle groups would then be next to be broken down to supply something to address the shortfall in caloric needs. The subsequent stage would be when his internal organs would then become compromised, specifically the liver, and could impart significant immune complications if the underlying situation became extreme enough.

In other words, the state Peter 'Scruffy' McScruffy had obtained before being 'collected' by the woman tucked into his… side…

Verde blinked twice, then glanced over intending to ask a question or two. Specifically, 'why are you there?' and perhaps 'why was my previous inquiry for further clarification not answered?'

The man who had been seated next to him previously, who's spot Sonya had stolen and in perhaps a very limited scope of situations being annoyed by that was understandable however he didn't believe they applied to this specific one given they were still in intermission, suddenly leaned back. From looming over the highly unimpressed thief, and rather suspiciously drawing back his hands across the short tabletop.

He could not postulate any reason the man should have his hands near a supposedly 'taken' woman nor what on earth his intents might've been in doing so anyways. Unfortunately, said woman then compounded the unspoken situation by obviously pretending there was nothing about the scene was of interests by raising a completely divorced topic to speak on instead.

"Tatiana would like you to call her. Because she's a worrywart like that, and Adrik's her friend so you're also her friend meaning she would like frequent reports on how you're doing with the information."

Verde was perfectly able to run multiple lines of thought at the same time, if he noticed they were important enough to keep track of simultaneously. Trying to figure out what he had a glance of occupied some, not all, his attention and he could reasonably split his attention to also address her and finish the calculations estimating his rough caloric needs. "As her preview is medical in nature, that is not an imposition as long as the opportunity to inquire into different if related topics can then be raised."

She was paying the bulk of her attention to him, an obvious social snub for whatever passed between Sonya and his previous tablemate. Said man was equally as obviously irate at the brush off and given the direction his attention had shifted to… intent on making some trouble for her. Likely with the organizers of the event, who might choose to object to an unregistered 'freeloader's' inclusion when she was not invited.

A useless and ill-thought out bit of revenge, if indeed it was in the first place. She would not be the
first 'significant other' attending with their scientifically inclined partners in the room much less for the entire summit. He had made inquiries into the subject when she first informed him she would attend as well.

Past both her and him, about two tables down the room, the mathematician Lanthier was rather intently watching the situation discreetly if still rather pointedly. Possibly, the man had caught something Verde had not and could possibly inform him what seemed the issue between his boss and another of the attending scientists.

Utilizing the one arm he had full range of movement with as she had retained and kept the use of the other, he raked together the papers he had been using as a notebook. Including the pages from Tatiana as well, as he did not believe anyone would appreciate it if he left them behind absentmindedly. "You had another intent for this morning, did you not?"

Sonya hummed lowly, giving the impression she did not wish to move when in fact she hadn't been leaning against him at all even before she stole the use of his right arm to wrap around herself. "Yeah, if you don't mind. There's a couple things I could pick up in the city while we're here, and I believe you need a wrist watch."

…Verde couldn't wear a watch, his Lightning Flames tended to interfere with battery or electricity run electronics held close to his skin. Especially if he did not pay attention, it wasn't just pens with a tendency to explode in his hands. "Is there a particular reason why you believe so?"

"I'm a full hour late, and you didn't mention it."

Point.

"Monsieur Verninac, the seminars are not quite over."

"Why does that fact matter, when we would not be the first few to leave?" He questioned somewhat sharply, handing the loose pages of notes back to Sonya for discreet disposal when she saw fit and rising to his feet. Surprisingly in concert with her, although it was highly likely such was due to her grace than his own. "We all had a chance to review the topics to be covered, and while interesting to hear new takes on a select number the rest do not particularly interest me in future avenues to explore just yet."

"I believe he might be more annoyed I'm preventing him from reading over your shoulder." Sonya posed after a moment to release him and instead slide her left hand into the crook of his elbow, apparently having caught Lanthier's attention and interpreted a few gestures into something understandable. The mathematician returned his attention to his eggs benedict, seemingly satisfied with his silent contributions he should be able to hear being positioned not that far away, until he could speak with the man himself Verde had to take her word for it.

"I have done nothing of the sort-"

"Indeed? Then our leave taking should not overly bother you." He interjected before the other man could finish his statement, irked by the possibility someone had been spying on the calculations intended to redress his current health issues.

Sonya allowed guidance out of the somewhat packed and noisy hall by her polite hold on him simply enough, one-handedly leafing through the papers he had given to her possession in a remarkable display of finger dexterity. "Done with them?"

"As much as one can be when the information is mostly guesswork at this stage." He now held the
rough estimates in memory, although the basis they were based upon was still unknown pending experience in clarifying what a 'base metabolic rate' would even be for his new state of both 'Flame active' and 'adult' taken together. "Further clarification can be obtained at another time."

"Then let's go start on stuffing your face. I'm pretty hungry too, honestly." The thief spoke more absently than with pointedly stressed intent he would have found more irksome. She also released him to fold the papers in half, then in quarters, and press her hands together around the significant pile momentarily.

Only a faint whiff of smoke betrayed their destroyed state, and such was subsequently ruined under their unhurried pace to the exit and her body breaking up the ashy wisp trails into nothingness as she retook his arm politely.

Verde was not particularly hungry himself after a breakfast larger than his usual in aimless hopes of perhaps beginning to address his caloric imbalance, however he likely could still and possibly should eat more to go with addressing her momentary use of Storm Flames. "Are you interested in anything specific?"

She gave him a sympathetic look, which did not impart any positive feeling. "Light eating. Fruits, nuts, and dairy. Fit it in whenever you can stand it, even if it's only a bite or so every few minutes. Other than that, drink all the beer. At least until you get used to the almost 'overeating' needs those like us have."

He suspected some of her aim in 'shopping in the city' included an uncomfortable number of snacks he might then be pressed with over the rest of the weekend. She had been rather alarmed and concerned by the oversight of no one informing him his dietary needs had changed with the advent of his Flame usage, and she was a mother to a young boy lacking her young dependent to smother.

As her possible aims coincided with his own intents, now he was fully informed and had a grip on the altered situation with his diet, Verde could merely accept it or guide her selection to his personal preferences instead of complaining or raising a protest.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970 continued. Toulouse, French Republic.)

"I've got him for the next," Sonya pointedly glanced at the watch on her wrist hooked around Verde's arm before looking back up, "three hours. Take a break, get whatever done, meet us back at the hotel at twelve-thirty for the next incredibly boring block of scientific lectures out of our paygrade but somehow in his."

"Sure thing, boss lady." Hawk agreed, handing over Alek's leash as the dog pressed against her knees entirely ecstatic to see her not fifteen minutes after she dropped him off to wait outside. "See you in a few then, Verde."

His long-suffering target of importance heaved a sigh through his nose, already looking somewhat bored and resigned already and the lady hadn't even started shopping yet.

Better him than, well, him.

The thief paying him a living wage and whatnot slid herself back into the scientist's side and led all three of them off down a French city street's sidewalk, without appearing to be the one guiding the couple plus dog around. Somehow.

"Like the lady said, take a break. I've got a couple things to check into..." McCarthy volunteered,
hands already ripping off the tie to go with the suit he deemed 'professional' enough to do for bodyguarding work. "Mostly obvious academic sabotage and the like I just want to be sure isn't aimed in our boy's direction, but I'll let you know if anything comes of it."

An opportunity to ditch the incredibly itchy janitor's jumpsuit, bonus. "Sure. Anywhere you want me to be about until then?"

The Mafia Land agent spent a few moments thinking the offer over, as skeptical as he was when it came to the boss he was taking very specific pangs to ensure his work was all according to his labor contract and above reasonable reproach.

Crammed it all into a damn month, and Hawk was going to be picking out the leaf cuttings from under his nails for even more months… but the results were pretty damn… well. He couldn't really tell much difference, having one 'obvious' bodyguard for Verde and one hidden away in the background instead of having them both visible, but supposedly the method worked.

He wasn't the only secret bodyguard pretending to be a janitor today, after all.

Interestingly, there was proper procedure to sliding bodyguards into a venue location's staff. McCarthy got him 'hired' just before another group made the same request for one of their junior members, and while the opportunity to spread the pain around was never a bad thing…

…something, something, but Hawk couldn't recall what memory his brain was trying to associate there.

As the various Mists contacted to try to help him out claimed, there were just no memories in his head to recall even if his brain tried to reach for them out of what was likely ingrained habit. All the assorted 'paths' memories apparently took were intact and undamaged so he knew how to feel a specific emotion and to take care of himself in a cold logical sort of way, the associated memories just was no longer recorded so when his mind tried to tie two or more half-remembered feelings together the associated images or sounds just… didn't show up in his mind.

He had this memory, and the implication there had been something similar once upon a time… but nothing more. Like it had been all strained out, leaving behind only particles of memory that he knew should be there but weren't whole to explain what and why.

It was an incredibly frustrating feeling, like having a song on the tip of one's tongue and just not being able to work out what lyrics should come next. He'd never be able to work it out, the songs had been destroyed and no one else ever heard them.

Most of everything he could recall now was either that frustrating feeling, or the new memories he had since waking up in the middle of a gunfight with the boss tackling him to the ground to prevent a messy death.

Yes, he had used Sonya's permission to fill out her library to research how the brain recorded memories and why the hell he couldn't recall anything beyond 'Mist mind-fucking'. She had offered it explicitly for him to figure himself out, so why the hell not?

He learned more about how memories could go wrong than how it worked at all, but it was a broad topic she now had a very comprehensive selection of.

"Stick around the hotel, if you can. In an hour, I really don't expect anything surprising right away." Garret eventually informed him, having decided on a course of action while the Storm smacked himself into a blank brick wall in his own head. "So get your shopping done quick, if you can."
Hawk needed to pick himself up a water bottle or find more discreet times to burn off the sunshine making him a bit hot under the collar with the Storm Flame temperature equalizing trick.

That the boss didn't remotely care if he wasted Flames... was... was that odd?

Everyone did it, from Sonya herself down to the brats she had running around her home. If you at the very least kept the use from civilian sight, she didn't give a damn what he did with his own Flames so no. It shouldn't be odd.

...unless it should be.

Hawk rubbed a broad, still somewhat unfamiliar hand over his mouth as the older man wandered off 'with a purpose'. That 'with a purpose' thing wasn't something he could mimic all that well yet, he'd figure it out eventually but likely not while the older veteran was with them.

With a sigh, the Storm dropped his arm and gripped the handle of the mop he had been in the middle of using before the boss stopped by and needed him to hold onto her dog to fetch their priority target out of the rented part of this non-pet friendly venue.

At the very least, he could finish mopping the floor before fucking off on the people here. In return for putting up with the imposition of busybody guards, they had requested that unless an emergency the bodyguards hiding out with them finished the tasks assigned to them if reasonably possible.
Verde critically examined the little silver and glass disk, and the equally tiny second hand sweeping smoothly across the satin-finished brass watch face under the tiny round window. "In truth, I failed to realize this model of timepiece was still on offer."

"I only know because of Peter's work. He found enough on how to manufacture gemstones that I got curious why there was so much he could find." Sonya replied as she kept half an eye on her fluffy puppy moping outside alone, a little boredly. "Apparently, the biggest consumer of industrially produced jewels are watchmakers."

They had been here a full hour so far, and as interesting as it was to examine watch after timekeeper… her attention span had waned a long time ago. The incessant ticking noises weren't helping, for all that it was probably a staple of watch-centric stores it was still annoying to listen to given enough time.

"Possibly due to the lower coefficient of friction a glassy material would possess comparative to utilizing another metal alloy or composite could hope to achieve naturally. Thus why 'jeweled bearings' are optional features in some of these pieces." Rambled the man absently, switching from the watch he had been observing to another in the same display case and critically comparing the two for the minute differences visible. "Aside which… silicon dioxide is long known to be a piezoelectric material, subjected to mechanical stress and some facets accumulate electrical charges. Reversed holds true as well, subjected to an electrical charge the crystalline structure will flex with measurable accuracy."

Notice she hadn't asked why watchmakers would use glass jewels, merely mentioned she had once wondered. A question a few previous watchmakers had answered for her, some time ago when the question arose, about why 'quartz' clocks were so accurate or why they would want fake sapphires in their tightly wound cogs.

Of course he was the kind to memorize random trivia to spew forth if a random subject ever popped up, even if one wasn't asking. The massive nerd.

"Late last year, a Japanese company finally got quartz clock mounted in a wristwatch." Offered the painfully young clerk observing Verde's glacially slow progress in browsing the watchmaker's storefront offerings, seemingly trying to impress the scientist who was entirely indifferent to the offered information.

"A notable, if somewhat expected, development in electrical engineering." Dismissed her companion tonelessly, with more than enough self-control to not glance at the case of 'quartz clocks' available in the very same store they were all in. "Crystal oscillators have been known of since the nineteen-thirties, and several larger models are available for public purchase to this day. Miniaturizing the components for more utility would be merely a process of testing ratios and minimizing inaccuracies in the final product rather than innovative application to solve an inherent flaw in personal timekeeping options."

The thief just had to shrug for the poor kid, Verde was apparently feeling very persnickety this afternoon or didn't feel like being impressed at all right now.

It might have something to do with the basket of big-boy Lightning snacks purchased with the intent...
of helping the man gain back all the weight he had been steadily losing over the summer, which were hanging off the crook of his arm. Or maybe he was always a pickier shopper than even her own damn sister, it wasn't like she had the experience to say otherwise when he wasn't moderately annoyed with her.

From what little she did now know… apparently if he was going to pay out for something, it was going to be the best something available. Furthermore, yes. He very much would like to examine and compare every feature he had to pick from in order to decide on which combination he might like. Even if it took a ridiculous amount of time.

Produce and various dairy-based food items wasn't too hard, annoying but since the options available were so limited to just what kind of vegetables, fruits, and/or dried meats he might like to eat it had been over with quickly. At least the grocery shopping was.

Getting the man a watch?

There was nothing in this store but watches. While even he couldn't make a case for inspecting and comparing the fucking wall-mounted clocks or the row of dark stained full-sized grandfather clocks off to one side… he could and did make a case for inspecting all options and the various possibilities in materials for what would likely become his new wristwatch.

On one hand, Sonya kind of understood. She hadn't been aware Lightnings tended to eschew watches just based on the fact they were stupidly easy to turn into a wrist-mounted explosive device by another hostile Lightning or excessive emotion. Two Lightnings couldn't charge the same battery without making it explode, as Galina informed her some time ago… so obviously some moron out there weaponized that idea to use against someone else in a nearly untraceable way.

Then again, Lightnings had Flames that were measurable by a ammeters or voltmeters touched against their skin naturally… so any electrical device had to be 'hardened' against their personal signatures or risk exploding in one's face when they got excited for any reason.

On another hand… battery-powered or electrical watches were not the only style available.

Hence why she was boredly waiting out Verde's overly thorough inspection of clocks of sized to wear on one's person, there were these things called mechanical watches. The kind of timepieces that were available before batteries became a thing, the popularity of the style might be fading but that didn't mean there were none to be had if need be.

No they weren't as accurate as a battery, or even a 'quartz', clock. They could be perpetually self-winding, fitted with a 'tourbillon' to minimize gravitational pull offsetting the movements, and even set to chime an hour interval to remind a certain green haired and eyed scientific asshole to eat regularly.

Then on the third side of this whole situation… Sonya was a thief. If she needed a new watch, and it wasn't an uncommon need for her since she was entirely too hard on her own equipment sometimes, she usually stole one. Her brother's, some passerby's, out of some store's display case… getting herself a watch to use, even for at best an hour or so before ditching it, was not that much of an event for her.

This whole… shopping thing. She didn't really 'get' it. She got the basics of the act, sure. You traded something you earned and/or stole with about an hour's worth of effort at an agreed attributed value for an object, service, or for an expertise not your own from another party/broker for a set group of whomever. That much was straightforward, and about the limit of her understanding of the act.
Sometimes two parties differed on the value of whatever, and that was haggling. Haggling was sometimes expected and sometimes rude, but was also occasionally an option.

Usually, if she was window shopping, she was wasting time in between other motives.

Why it was so damn fun for those like Tatiana was where she got stumped. Verde was apparently another of those perfectly content to browse endlessly and not spend a damn unit of currency to gain anything out of the experience yet still found it perfectly rewarding somehow, given the sheer amount of time they had spent just trying to find him whatever he wanted. She'd understand more if he had a remote interest in purchasing even one or two of whatever he had run his fingers over while browsing, but now they were here for a full hour and a half and he had yet to make any noise of wanting a feature in whatever watch he wanted.

…Alek was now giving the metal and glass affair of a door separating him and her his full if limited attention, having already ruled out ineffectually scratching against the glass as able to gain the result he wanted. Sonya honestly would not put 'can I eat a metal door' out of her dog's current deliberation, the damn mutt had already tunneled through three wooden doors sat between her bathroom and her bedroom when he decided he wanted in and/or out mainly due to her sister not shutting up after they penned him up and turned the lights out.

Tatiana had reinforced that habit by cooing at the damn beast every fucking time, finding it 'adorable' her canine was so attached to her… when she was pretty sure Alek just hated not knowing what was going on if he could hear something happening and her involvement was minor if at all in his opinion.

"Anytime now. Even Alek thinks you're taking too long."

"Patience, woman." Verde snipped back without so much twitching a muscle in her direction, answering her slightly bitchy tone with a flat refusal. "One's deliberations should not be rushed, doing so is a disservice to both the craftsman that created these pieces as well as to myself as I safeguard against second thoughts on my purchase. Furthermore, I see no reason why your pet's impatience is my concern."

Apparently, they both were petty little shits willing to nitpick and dig at one another for whatever was the greater annoyance they had. Which was great, because it really helped to take the edge off the building… whatever that had been lingering ever since this summer and hadn't gotten better with the ability to range out as far as she wanted restored.

Sonya hadn't had this much fun since a specific hitman went off to die on her.

Fuck, that was depressing.

With an exasperated sigh, she dug out a charge card linked to one of her Mafia Land business accounts from the depths of her purse and tossed it to the kid supposedly manning the register but really watching his fellow Frenchman's progress through every piece he had to sell. "For when he finally picks something, I'm going to keep the dog from trying to dig under your door. I'll be back to sign for it."

She also stole the fifteen francs in change Verde had stuffed into his back pocket from buying the groceries, because. He wasn't being particularly wordy this time, but she still felt like taking it.

Another book for her.

Alek looked as if all his Christmases and birthdays had come early for her stepping outside the
somewhat noisily ticking store and joining him outside, his whippy banner of a tail pulling double
duty as a rudimentary leaf blower/broom for the watchmaker's front stoop as his ears laid back
against his skull and he whined for her to know how happy he was.

"You have the most limited attention span ever." Her puppy did not remotely care what she thought
of him, pawing at her left boot for even more attention. With another sigh, the thief knelt to give him
the personal touch he was apparently craving. "And we're going to have to dye your fur again…
hope you're looking forward to that later tonight."

Given how insistently he nudged under her palm with his very wet nose, the dog didn't currently
give two shits what might happen later tonight or found it to be a much lesser concern overall.

Sonya obediently dug her fingers into his fluffy ruff, before he thought to put dirty paws on her jeans
like she was trying to train him out of doing.

It took Verde less than fifteen minutes to join her outside, a new watch on his wrist and her card in
hand. "…issue?"

"No." She realized she had rather abruptly left him and the store, but really she couldn't muster up the
willpower to care right now even with a double handful of fluffy fur. Also, that was probably too
short for someone of limited exposure to her personality. "Done?"

He eyed her warily, as if she was an unknown science experiment that he wasn't sure if he wanted to
dig into or not. "I hold the suspicion I might have done something you deem wrong, in spite of
evidence to the contrary up until a few moments ago, and am unsure if-

"Just. No, you didn't do anything wrong. Ill timed reminders." It probably wasn't wise to keep
blaming Renato for her own mood swings, while yeah he was part of it some to more and maybe
even most of the problem was her very limited social tolerances being pressed just a bit too far. She
had these kinds of 'limit reached' incidents before the hitman disappeared on her and would likely
have more in the future too. "A better subject. Anything else you can think of before we have to be
back at the conference center for your egghead shindig?"

Alek was resigned, but unsurprised, that he was abandoned in favor of her taking back the little metal
rectangle that allowed access to a stupidly ridiculous amount of currency.

"…a beer or three would not be amiss." Verde eventually suggested before she could pass him back
into the store, without inflection to his tone to inform her if he found the second brushoff as upsetting
or whatever.

"How about lunch instead?" She countered dryly, with a pointed glance to the snack foods still
hanging on his arm. "I'll buy you a case of beer for tonight if you eat."

Given how hard he rolled his eyes at her parting shot, he wasn't feeling particularly upset at all.

Well good. At least she hadn't ruined that with her random PMS-ing.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970 continued. Nurse's Office, Moscow School #3054,
Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"The only reason," Tatiana informed the Misty-whatever the hell standing in her doorway pointedly,
"I'm going to let you get away with this is because I gave the other you a physical and he passed.
The moment one of you fail, whichever one of you I'm looking after, I will do whatever it takes to get
The echo of Usov standing there gave her a darkly mocking grin, with the kid's favorite 'too wide and too toothy' impression he somehow gave off when she knew for a fact nothing about his mouth was inhuman. "Are you sure you know someone that fits that bill?"

"I'm pretty sure Nya fits."

"Sonya, Miss Bazanova, is no longer a Zolotov." Not-Usov reminded her pointedly, wagging a finger back and forth in her direction. Looking for all the world like a real kid, even if that kid was supposed to be kilometers away and in Italy with his parents. "Technically, she no longer holds precedent over me."

The nurse gave up trying not to show her building headache and rubbed her forehead. "But I'm pretty sure the other you will greatly mind whatever your doing impacting his shenanigans down south."

"...below the belt, I like it."

"I really don't give a fuck. Get out of here, and I swear to whatever you find sacred if you fail your scheduled checkup..."

"I won't." Scoffed the Mist-Flame-whatever the hell dismissively, obediently fucking off after that last parting shot.

The Sun tiredly slumped into the provided nurse's rolling chair, blessing whatever had made her little sister splash out for the ludicrously comfortable extras most Moscow schools tended to do without. It didn't greatly detract from her current spat of issues, but it was nice to appreciate for a moment before getting back to them.

Avdotya was a good nurse, but frankly that was likely all she was going to be. The Storm might have the attitude to be a physician, but not the desire or drive to be a medical investigator thinking outside the 'usual' box. Her work tended to reflect that, exact and complete up to the point she was trained to and not a step further.

It wasn't a problem with the other nurse, per se.

Kappel might like having a senior nurse he wouldn't have to keep training up and losing to the rest of the hospital due to their own desires or Flame-related usefulness. He didn't need a particularly inventive or brilliant assistant, he just needed someone to deal with the minuitia of medical records while he focused on the more important issues to give him more time to work with.

Tatiana hadn't spoken to her junior nurse for a long minute now, but the last time it sounded like the girl just wanted a stable position to be secured before looking further into the future about what else she might do with her life.

Understandable, given only half the Zolotov orphan pool was housed with foster parents and the rest tended to do day-trips from whatever orphanage or slums they snuck out of. She hadn't asked, and the other nurse hadn't volunteered, what her home situation before joining her in Mafia Land had been. The fact she had eschewed giving out her surname was kind of a hint she didn't want anything to do with her family situation... if she had one.

Frankly, as far as the medical notations a schoolhouse should be generating for their students, Avdotya had done phenomenal. They had been taught the same method of record keeping from the same doctor, so Tatiana could easily see where the younger woman left off and where she needed to
pick up from. Eighty-ninety percent of the basic work was done for their dorm-stayers and the day-attendees, documenting childhood scrapes and breaks as well as tracking everyone's vaccination progress to comply with Soviet regulations.

That last ten-twenty percent were the 'trouble' cases. Like that whatever of Usov's.

It could not be the real kid. For one it, and she flatly refused to call the Mist-shade anything else, had done everything but say 'no' to a medical checkup to supplement/update Usov's records. Whereas the actual kid hadn't given two thoughts to saying no, or at least didn't give her the impression there might be something distinctly unnatural about his situation. That refusal of the Moscow-based Usov was understandable now, those records were stolen out of the 'rightful spots' a Soviet child's records would be held and were currently in Italy as she knew it to be since she already updated them.

Supplying an update to a medical record that didn't exist would alarm the fuck out of whatever hospital, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, and probably even the KGB all at once. It would bring a serious amount of attention down on the schoolhouse, probably of a level they wouldn't survive.

She understood, didn't like but understood, why it had refused to get it's health checked out. That was one case out of the about hundred more she got to deal with now, as nearly all the busywork in establishing the baselines of the more compliant students was pretty much already done.

Lots of orphans with health scares they thought if they ignored long enough it'd go away, abuse victims either unintentionally or intentionally trying not to get their abuser's work documented for whatever variety of reasons personal or not, and so forth. A lot of stubborn, baby crooks who had to be encountered and confronted in just the right way to get them to tell her what their personal situations were so she could help them navigate them successfully with as much of their body's integrity as possible… which would likely take longer than a school year to work through.

Good thing she also had the year after next too.

And, the school's student population was going to expand even more than it had between their first year and second of operation. One of their neighboring schoolhouses needed some serious maintenance, and with schoolhouse #3054's opening with all the underutilized space available for more students…

…they'd be getting half the civilian teachers as well, but that held as many pitfalls as taking on all those students while they had criminal-centric lessons also going on. For as long as the other school would be shut down for whatever issue, everyone's duties would be expanded a tiny bit to cover for a civilian school so they could keep on pretending they were just like any other… at least on the surface.

The Mist Web would be getting one hell of a workout to keep everything under civilian notice.

Tatiana pulled her lovely and new short ankle boots under her again, having finished writing a coded note to Avdotya about why she should leave Usov's whatever the hell alone about missing his checkups to slip into the kid's file they had for him. Which was, surprise, completely empty of anything else when she put her note in the file cabinet.

She'd have to mention it to Anna's replacement so a Mist would hide the fact it was practically empty if their school got inspected while the shade was still lingering around.

"Done for the day?"
"Holy shit!" She shot her mother a dirty look over a shoulder, firmly shutting the drawer she had open with her left hand as she turned around. "Damn, Lisa. You scared the hell out of me."

The older woman leaning up against the open doorway of the nurse's office looked less than impressed. "Tats, you might've been able to get away with not keeping half an eye out for eavesdroppers and the like at the hospital you're working at... but here you need to be a bit more aware."

"I'm not rusty, everything's in place and whatnot to keep an eye on every corner. I just am not too used to using them yet. It's someone else's system."

She shook her head and pushed off from the door frame, beckoning for her to join her mother for whatever aim she had with this surprise visit on a weekend. "If you insist, Tats. Readjust fast, if you please."

"To answer your question," Tatiana hurried past that topic with, because yes her mother had a big point and she knew it but... application was proving to be a bit sticky, "I have to catch up with whoever took over for Usov real quick."

"They still refuse to have a physical place recorded for where to find them." Lisa offered for her, with a shrug that informed her that part of her duties probably wouldn't be getting done today. "You'll have to catch up with our oldest one, their half mix with your girl Galina's side. He's assisting Andrei with keeping control in the boys' dorm during operating hours."

Why the hell was a thirty-year-old Mist/Lightning sticking around for?

Last she heard, the guy had his own opinions on his skills and had kept on with his day job even while getting a nine-year-old's help with mastering his abilities. Well, she could ask when she went to request some additional help keeping the school's reputation all shiny and clean in the government's eyes.

"Right... okay. So...?"

Lisa slid her arm through hers, guiding her down the empty hallways to the general direction of the front entrance and the principal's office. "Do I want to know what in hell happened between you and Nicolai?"

"Some serious miscommunication." Tatiana allowed sourly, not particularly wanting to get into that topic as it was still kind of sore. "Why, what's he done?"

"Nothing, which is why Arseniy and I were concerned. No bad-mouthing you, which is entirely understandable because your father would have a little something to say in return... but he's also just buckled down and got back to work without so much as a mention what you were up to when asked."

"...that's... not what I expected." Frankly, from his parting shot, she had expected him to find a sickeningly saccharine new girlfriend in a fast hurry to rub into her nose.

What the hell was he playing at?

...probably a long-game. If he still thought he wanted her, which might not even be the case. He might be trying to get over her, so if and when she 'came crawling back' he'd have the totally legitimate position to flatly refuse...

The Sun nurse sighed heavily, already tired of the entire subject and puzzling out what her ex's
motives might be. "Let's not talk about him anymore, please."

"Alright, how about your new man?" Lisa inquired sweetly without missing a beat, letting the topic change even though she had to be curious about how it all fell out from how little she knew of it if Nicolai wasn't saying anything. "How is he shaping up to be?"

"...stupidly rich." Tatiana allowed, instantly feeling better at the mere mention. "And he didn't even use that to begin with, but apparently he's got as deep of pockets as Nya does now."

"So he's got some self-control, lovely."

Her mother sounded like she was barely hiding a snicker, and frankly she felt that way too as she gave voice to her amusement.

Money, around thieves, was not impressive. Frankly, flashing great financial ability around them was just a great recipe to lose it all stupidly quickly. More expensive, flashier, more glitter... it just put a bigger target on your back than anyone else around if one needed some quick cash.

It was really sweet of Ganauche and everything to offer to get her whatever she might want for her next birthday... but there was little Tatiana couldn't get herself if she wanted something that badly. Well, aside her doctor's license and maybe another pair of boots from her little sister's master cordwainer.

She wouldn't be stealing from her baby sister's contact, civilian or not. He did damn fine work, and helped her pin down the underlying cause of chronic foot pain she had been experiencing the last couple years as something serious and not just a weirdly insistent problem she just couldn't heal herself of. He earned more than enough respect in one meeting to be exempt from any of her mischief, if it would piss off Sonya or not.

His prices might be a bit rich for her, but he was a master craftsman and deserved to be paid like it from the feel of her feet right now. A full day's work, and she barely had an ache in the arch or instep of her feet. Utterly fantastic, she totally wanted more of these so if he wanted to keep spending what amounted to three of her paychecks for one pair of boots then he could do so with her blessings.

Her doctor's license, on the other hand, she wanted to earn. The legitimate way, even if there were several black-market ways to become a back-alley surgeon she could dally in. It'd be just as 'legal' as Mafia Land's method, but less creditable in the very specific circles she was working in now and wouldn't be also valid in any civilian hospital around the world either.

A difference of fine hairs, but still a difference. Those minute differences held a wealth of value to those that specialized in relocating physical items of value around, because it was harder to obtain therefore of actual value to someone who could always get more money if needed.

Her arm was squeezed, drawing her attention back to her mother rather patiently waiting out her daydreaming. "Good thoughts?"

Her boyfriend, stupidly comfortable boots, and her personal goal in life. "Yeah, you can say that."

"The reason I stole you out of your office," Lisa allowed as they descended the school's front steps to the sidewalk apparently on their way to her home with Arseniy from the direction she turned them in, "was to get your opinion on my newest personal student. She's... I don't want to say stubborn, because she is trying. A few lessons are not sticking right, and while a phoneline with daily conversations are workable they are not ideal."

"She's never going to have the right experiences to put it all into perspective, not without something
"drastic happening." Tatiana admitted for her as she squinted a bit trying to readjust to full sunlight after a couple solid hours of reading through Avdotya's handwriting to get a better understanding of what was left for her to work on in the term."Nya ran into the same trouble getting her to take her combat exercises seriously, she kept on getting distracted through no fault of her own but... she... it's not intentional, she just can't really understand why she needs them when it's mostly for 'just in case'."

"I was afraid it might be something like that." Her mother sighed heavily, frustrated enough to make a little annoyed mou with her lips. "And that's not going to change, is it?"

"With her husband being who he is? Not without a whole lot of luck, which wouldn't be a good idea to hope for because next time Nya probably won't be there to take a knife through the foot to accidentally keep her alive."

Lisa turned that over in her mind a couple times, slotting the provided details away in that steal trap of a finely tuned thief's brain of hers before refocusing on Tatiana. Quirking a smaller smile for her, her mother tightened her hold on her arm briefly as they wandered in the direction of her home. "Well, that agrees with my suspicions. That'll require some thought into how to solve safely... now then, Nya had some trouble apparently?"

"With the usual suspects." She confirmed wryly. "Not that it's too unusual, or unexpected. It was only marginally annoying, she was on top of most of it."

The older woman hummed her musical 'more now, if you'd please' tone, and she had to grin because it had been the bane of her childhood misadventures... and now she had copied it so many times she was starting to become immune. Not entirely, and she explained the scare with a sniper in France as well as the runabout Sonya had to give the long-distance KGB operatives on their trip for stupidly expensive and comfortable shoes while trying to avoid mentioning anything incriminating because not doing it would earn her some of her mother's rare ire, but she chose to obey it this time instead of spoke before thinking about it.

They got into discussing Cherep's whole 'deed holding' for Sonya and what that might impact when it came to the KGB for them both before Tatiana got the idea she was being 'firmly' guided back to Lisa's place weather she liked it or not. "So... visit more often?"

"I didn't insist with Nya because she had odd hours, and Arseniy could see her whenever he wanted which meant I could too." Lisa confessed without a drop of shame or chagrin for her motives being figured out, slanting her a styly amused look from the corner of her eye as they turned down a painfully nostalgic street. "You on the other hand, I can easily miss between being a principal and getting home to make Arseniy and Valera dinner. Every Saturday, please. Or Sunday, I'm not particularly picky... I just would like an evening a week while you're in Moscow."

"Done." Tatiana agreed brightly, having to stoop a tiny bit because she was taller than her foster mother by a few centimeters just to lay the side of her head on the older woman's shoulders. "I'll be there every Saturday, might as well make it a 'we survived the school week' party."

"Good."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 17th of October, 1970 continued. Salon de Marvejol, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Given how Verde had been reading over her shoulder for at least a good half an hour before she and
the other 'dependents' were politely but firmly kicked out of the conference room for reasons, Sonya was pretty sure the Lightning wasn't all that interested in the topics of safe atomic disarmament of nuclear warheads leftover around the world… if only the two biggest culprits that held the most, the US of A and the Soviet Union, would stop their dick-waving contest using beleaguered Vietnamese farmers as proxies.

It was very forward-thinking of CECAM to try planning for disarmament, and in another world she knew for a fact it had happened to a degree… but that was no time soon. Possibly in another twenty years, maybe.

Egg-heads. Well-meaning egg-heads, but still men thinking way too far into the future to be of use right now. No wonder Verde got bored so easily.

The thief in question took her three thesauruses on Ancient Greek, her scroll of dubious quality on Stoic Physics, the notebook she had been laboriously trying to translate a clean copy of the scroll onto for more in-depth and less careful review later on, and her three different colored pens with her to a side-parlor when asked. With nearly most of the female attendees, as apparently the bulk of them were not in fact invited to the shindig on their own merit.

Which, annoyingly, included that girl from the first day.

Out of the five socialite gold-diggers, the sixteen older lab assistance/secretaries that had half an idea of what their significant others were up to here but were too nervous to say anything to anyone, the nine elderly women who seemed to have scientific degrees themselves if in non-desirable specialties who all knew one another on sight, Sonya was one of three others the woman's age.

The other two were airheaded idiots, so that meant the other younger woman in the room made a beeline for her ass before she could even set down her books.

"Well?"

"Do you specialize in deciphering ancient Greek?" Sonya inquired sarcastically, setting down her equipment and the scroll on a side table as this room didn't have a decent work surface at hand. "I haven't even started qualifying what it's written about yet."

"What the hell is taking so long?"

"That I'm not sure how much of it's missing still," she cut off the likely equally bitchy follow-up question obviously on her lips, "and ancient Greek is not written in an easily grasped method by modern sensibilities. A good part of it is in fragments, and fitting them back into where they should be is tricky."

She could orientate them reasonably well, which parts were top and which were leading to the next section was easy to figure out especially when the fragments were large enough to have more than one line on one side. However it wasn't like any other puzzle she ever tried, because age or just mishandling had left gaps in the information recorded and there were no indication where those simply null-areas were.

Worse yet, she wasn't used to parsing through whatever method of Greek this really was from only a couple hours of solid work at it. She'd pick that up probably by the end, but that wasn't now.

The other brunette glowered sourly down at her, which Sonya flatly ignored in favor of pulling over a strategically positioned coffee table to work upon. The gold-diggers gossiping in a corner far from the door were aghast at her presumption of modifying the room they were directed to wait within
using something like her own muscles, and the secretaries all looked sorry they hadn't thought to bring along their own work as well, but one of the graying older women glanced over with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh? Do we at least have one more with a sorry excuse of a brain in their skulls?"

"Rather presumptuous of you, how do we know you've got a brain?"

"De Mort!" Squawked the chemist that just loved to irritate the hell out of her, flapping a hand nearly in Sonya's face. "Don't be so fucking rude. That's-

"I don't fucking care." Snarled back the fed-up Storm-Cloud viciously, pinning the woman with all the hate she could probably safely show a civilian. "I have work to do, shut your damn mouth and leave me the fuck alone."

Her mouth opened to respond against her rather reasonable request, but a faintly stained and scarred palm suddenly plastered itself across the lower half of her face. The steel-haired older lady gave her junior a very ugly look, her other hand drawing the annoying bitch away from the thief. "You wouldn't let some random rank amateur bother you about when your work might be done, would you? Why the bloody hell are you trying it on her?"

"No respect these days." Agreed one of the old warhawk's companion women, joining the other middle-aged to elderly ladies in being very disproving. "Why, in my day-

"You and Gregory were too busy in the broom closet to have noticed." One of the others snipped in bitchily… which was as far as Sonya's interests in eavesdropping over there extended.

That girl was probably going to hate her for the rest of her miserable existence for the social embarrassment earned from others she seemed to genuinely look up to… why was beyond her as these women seemed perfectly content to be firmly in the shadows of their 'other halves', but whatever.

Sonya had elbow room again.

…unfortunately, before she even got the scroll unrolled far enough to find where she had been interrupted at, the second most irritating person in the room attempted to politely gain her attention. Trying to ignore it merely earned her another hesitant "Um, excuse me…?"

The girl had balls, taking a full brunt of Sonya's glare with only a small wince.

"Sorry, but… you came with Verninac, right?" She pressed forward somewhat bravely, trying for a smile that came out much more like a grimace. "Do you have any idea what he's work-

"Stop. Turn around." She even helpfully made a circle with one finger so she'd get the damn idea. "And go away."

"But-

"Lady, if you want to still have a head by the end of this, get the fuck away from me." The 'innocent younger' guise the girl had been wearing slipped for two seconds as she adjusted to the flat refusal, more than long enough for Sonya to catch on. "Gilles signed an NDA, so try someone else. Like him."

The bitch number two made a disgusted huffing noise that wasn't quite a tisk and not an actual huff either, leaning her weight to one leg and planting a fist on her hip. "He won't look twice at me, I
already tried. Very polite, but not susceptible to a bit of lip service... if you catch my meaning. So, how much is he paying you to cling to his arm for the weekend?"

Well, technically, Sonya was paying Verde. Even more technically, with food and a living situation and maybe a very pricey watch. "Fuck. Off."

"I hope she sticks around." Warhawk number one commented to a lady she was going to call warhawk number two, in an aside that was not remotely quiet enough to stay between them. "I haven't been this entertained since my children took me out to those strikes in May sixty-eight."

...she was going to get nothing done tonight, wasn't she?

One of the socialites decided to try her luck next, sashaying over as if she wasn't going to get her head verbally ripped off just as easily as the others. Sonya glowered at the entire room, rolling back up her work for easy transportation.

Fuck this bullshit, she was going to go hide out in a vent where she could be of some use as well as keep half an eye on what Verde was doing.

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Upon completing his usual post-waking habits, Verde was inordinately surprised when he was ambushed almost immediately after leaving the bathroom before he could process Sonya was in fact awake. She had not reacted to his leaving the bed, but apparently that had not correlated to remaining asleep.

The former blonde groggily squinted at him, now straddling his waist with her bare thighs while also pinning him to the bed, then huffed sourly as she slid off his stomach. "Don't sneak around. Just get up if you have to."

"...my apologies?"

"If you sneak around me, I assume you're up to no good. Which was confusing as fuck, because as far as I was aware there was only you and Alek in bed with me and neither of you should have ulterior motives." Continued the woman for his benefit, crawling off him and back into the covers to likely return to sleep. "Just... get up. You shouldn't be concerned with my ass."

"I was attempting to be considerate." Verde shot at her back, irked as he realized she had not been overstating her own body heat retention rates and he couldn't keep from shivering now she had removed herself. Compared to his own, which was severely impacted by his current health issue, she was downright feverish to the touch.

"Yeah? Don't." Sonya advised him equally shortly, shifting only slightly before apparently going back to sleep.

He was left rather uncomfortably aware and freezing, half-sprawled across the foot of the bed. Sourly, and aware nursing a petty grudge against the woman was somewhat inane but unable to help it as she seemed to enjoy being petty with him, he ruminated on that shortly delivered advice and reluctantly returned to bed as well.

She might have a point, and his attempting to respect her state of unconsciousness had in fact done the exact opposite and vaulted her straight into wakefulness. If so then he fully understood her current curtness, and he regretted causing her the strain.
Then again, her causing him much the same with that ambush had given him an instant headache of full alertness as well. Therefore, he was not as regretful as he might've otherwise been.

Verde cursed softly as another shiver worked its way up his spine due to the late autumn chill to the air, attempting to wind himself into the thin duvet in a vain hope of improving the level of heat trapped by the fabrics somehow without overly bothering his bed partner.

Sonya lifted her head and shot him a glance over a shoulder, possibly in response to either his movements or the tugging of the covers, then suddenly turned over and sprawled out across his chest. "You are a ridiculous idiot, you know."

"I beg your pardon?" As annoyed as he was, he still couldn't keep from almost hugging the woman for the body warmth she apparently intended to share freely. She did not even flinch when he dug his cold fingers into her back, so he assumed the motivation for this readjustment was correct.

Even if it was highly improper, he also couldn't dredge up the motivation to complain when she slid a significantly warmer thigh between his own for access to his femoral arteries. That made at least half of himself covered by a source of warmth, and as it stalled his next shiver in it's tracks he instantly forgave her for all the troublesome feelings she had so far caused in return.

"You're taking way too much care with this entire thing." She informed him once they were both situated for as much comfort as possible while sharing a limited amount of real estate, sliding slightly downward for some aim. "I get it, and appreciate the thought, but seriously. Stop being considerate and be more of an asshole. You're fully in your right to be so."

"Such does not necessarily mean I wish to be so." He countered pointedly, satisfied when she pressed her forehead against his superior thyroid artery and stilled fully.

With both his femoral and thyroid arteries positioned next to a source of excessive heat, and the woman was as claimed in being significantly warmer to the touch than most everyone else he ever had experience with, that was the extremes of his extremities supplied with artificially warmed blood. She did not have the length to reach either at the same time, so her forethought in economical movement was greatly appreciated.

While he could deal with a cold nose, cold feet were unnecessarily bothersome and would keep him uncomfortably awake for more than long enough for some random thought to distract him from the aims of returning to sleep. With her positioning his blood was being warmed by her own femoral artery on its way downward to hasten his body's return to a more equalized and suitable internal temperature for human comfort.

Now with that drugging sensation of being or becoming comfortably warm in a cold environ slowing his thought processes, Verde readjusted his arm to lay less awkwardly behind the small of her back and so she wouldn't cut off the circulation in it if still keep his fingers tangled in the back of the dress shirt he had worn last night and she had appropriated as sleepwear.

"Well if you were more of an asshole, I'll stop feeling so bad for forcing half this shit on you." Sonya muttered sourly into his collarbone.

Pitched as quietly as she had spoken the words, there was little possibility of mistaking or not hearing her comment due to how little space there was now between them. "You have addressed the worst of the excessively uncomfortable events, a script I can work from has proven to be most ideal."

"Last night everyone was more interested in the lectures than what someone else might be doing a table or two away, that's not going to last." She countered, sniffing experimentally and huffing
without explaining what that was all about. "The more serious subjects they want more should've been last night, now we're going to lose the attention spans of a couple handfuls the longer this goes on. By the end, I foresee a whole lot of twittering gossip sessions going on at the same time as the minor subject matters are reviewed. Your wooden acting skills won't stand up to that kind of interest."

"Forgive me for not being particularly skilled in deception."

The temporary brunette nearly woven into his side remained silent long enough he assumed she had given up the topic as dead, allowing him to focus more on the heat creeping into his toes and thawing them out rather than the slightly pointed chin set into his sternum or the off-set heartbeat that didn't belong to him.

…or the rest of the very feminine form pressed intimately into his side, for the express reason of sharing body heat.

"Is it the lie that bothers you the most?" Sonya eventually jogged him out of his comfortable thoughts with, sounding alarmingly thoughtful. "If it wasn't a lie, would you stop being so jumpy and wooden?"

Verde's eyes popped open with alarm, and as blurry and as pointless as it was he still gave the top of her head a strange look. "I do not believe this topic will be very conductive to your aims."

"…are you even more jumpy and wooden when dating someone?" She then wondered, much to his consternation.

…that made him sound like a particularly skittish *mus musculus*, and he did not appreciate the comparison. "The underlying basis of my thoughts on the matter are of contention, not the nomenclature used to describe it. The fact of the matter is that your lie is not believable, and therefore I waste too much time on contemplating how best to reinforce your actions without compromising it."

She surged upright, straddling his lower abdomen again, a highly affronted expression on her face if he gave his blurry vision any credit with her so close. "Why in the hell not?"

His feet were mostly warm, he let the re-positioning go without complaint even if her new position straddling his lower abdomen again exposed his only recently warmed upper body to the cold air. "One of your standing, meaning connected as well as athletic to go with your social standing, does not consort with-"

"Verde, I hate to break it to you, but this isn't high school. The moment high school, or college for that matter, ends… a very new and different social structure takes place." She laid out blandly, still annoyed with him as there was no change to her facial expression. "Those jocks and slick-mouthed 'popular kids' that probably haunted your school experiences? Most to the majority will be middle-aged factory workers, broken down miners, or just outright unemployed by the time they're thirty. Married to all those cheerleaders that wouldn't give you the time of day before, who would salivate over dating someone in your position now. Common peasants with maybe one or two exceptions, in other words. All those geeks and nerds? The bosses of those common peasants because they were smarter and focused on something aside physically punishing sports or merely superficial traits to develop into a career. By the time you will be thirty, you'll be fucking rich. Because I can be rich if I want to be, I bought a motherfucking castle basically sight-unseen by accident, and I pay you. Being rich makes you not a common peasant, and that means the social rules change even more."
Verde squinted one eye shut up at her somewhat blurry face, highly dubious of her claims.

"Did you see all those middle-aged scientists' wives? They were all very pretty, weren't they?" The thief tried next, this time mockingly silkily to let him know she thought he was a mite slow without needing to strain himself to clearly see her expression. "Well kept, expensively coiffured, and not all entirely equally bright. Right?"

While that was somewhat immature of her, he had to admit he had not found all the significant others he had been introduced to over the last two days to be of intellectual giants. Some were clever enough, or otherwise of a complementary or similar vocation to their matched halves, to be of some note.

…not all, but some.

"Do you really think those middle-aged women were equally as dorky or nerdy when they were in school? Or were always of the exact same 'social standing' as their husbands?" She pressed further, something very dark and twisted crossing that flattened expression that likely spoke of some interaction he was not aware of she was drawing facts from. "If more than half of those sorry examples of females had any fucking clue to share between them, I'd be pleasantly surprised. Furthermore, applying your logic to the situation… why the hell would there be any gold-diggers in the group?"

"…I beg your pardon?"

"Why would there be air-headed twits, with only one good idea to marry someone to provide them with the funds to live comfortably, married to 'men of science' who probably only hitched themselves to those idiots for the arm candy?"

Verde blinked blankly up at her, wracking his mind to justify his position and unable to pull from more than just his experiences in public and private schooling she had insisted were no longer applicable. Which possibly might not equally apply to his life now as it had then when he learned all these rules, if the evidence she was providing held up to stress testing.

"For your information, Verde, you are prime real estate to those women." Sonya concluded with, pointedly jabbing a finger into his face. "You aren't handsy even when I give you an engraved invitation, you're apparently 'respectful and polite' when a fucking bitch tried to seduce you from me for information, and surprise… you have work with a private company that has you under an NDA which means you're being paid a shit-ton for that silence. Ergo, a target for a gold-digger looking for a better 'sugar daddy' to keep her in all the trendy hellishly expensive styles they have become accustomed to."

He… couldn't quite keep the dawning horror off his face as he belatedly realized a few incidents had less accidental and innocent motivations behind it, if her now self-satisfied expression was of any indication. Specifically, he could recall the incident she was alluding to… and realized that how he had taken it to appear had possibly and believably not been the case.

From what information he had retained so long post-incident, he could not clearly say she had no point. The inability to doubt her was somewhat damning, for that meant he had to take both theories into account until one proved superior.

He honestly did not want this change to be true.

"Surprise. You're now the rich, popular, up-and-coming rock star with the possibly shady and dangerous background in the scientific community." Drawled the woman sarcastically.
"Congratulations, you're a bad boy."

He spluttered somewhat unattractively, unable to work out which of the now immediately pressing questions he should give voice to first. Trying to sit upright was foiled when she planted a hand on his shoulder and pinned him back against the bed, still irritated with his apparent social thickness.

"So now," she mercilessly continued with without giving him a moment to collect his wildly splintering thoughts back together, "explain to me why it's not believable you're dating 'someone like me' when everyone else here believed it instantly. Use small words, I might miss something."

…this was significantly worse than his introduction to Dying Will Flames, insofar as a shift in paradigms went. Verde needed adult supervision near desperately, and unfortunately Adrik was far away in Italy while he had a very offended former blonde straddling his hips questioning why he found her unsuitable as had not been his intent.

Furthermore, he had seven or ten questions needing clarification about how the social structure had shifted so much on him without any notice. Unless he could muster up and answer for her own, he did not believe she would be receptive to answering his.

"Nothing? Good. Stop insisting it's not believable. For fuck's sake, I'm not doing all this shit for giggles." Sonya fairly snarled irritably, deciding that was suitable for her intents and sliding back down to apparently go back to sleep in their new positioning.

While on one hand, that would re-warm his exposed skin… he suddenly had several pressing concerns to ponder and he doubted he would be getting that rest he had wanted.

Instead of returning to contemplating his renewed status of warmth, his mind insisted on reviewing every instance of social interaction he had the past two days and applying her reasoning to it all. The more he reviewed, the less certain who's interpretation of the situation was correct as both seemed plausible enough.

Further testing was required. However, he was not certain about the structure such experimentation should have. There were not only his questions to be answered, but her apparently not as questionable as assumed deception to keep in place as well as his apparently vastly mutating 'reputation' to maintain… if her corrections held true.

…had she been more annoyed at a continued refuting of her underlying deception being doubted, or irked he had been refusing the idea of dating her more?

Was her very recent irritation with him based more in professional or personal pride?

Was she serious in implying she would not be averse to seeking a relationship with him?

How long until he could call Adrik and obtain a second opinion?

Verde glanced downward, at the blurry smudge of dark brown at the very bottom of his down-left field of view, and returned his gaze straight up when it seemed she had simply gone back to sleep without issue.

…fuck.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa,
"Please don't tell me you turned her down, man." Adrik asked of Verde on the phone as he kept an eye on that little fisherman boy Ruslana hired working in the back yard, on that boat that was just a little excessively web-encrusted. "Because seriously, a guy needs that kind of windfall at least once in their lives... if she was being serious. It probably wouldn't last... but damn."

The sheer amount of shit he could get away with if Tatiana's sister thought he might be suitable... well, Sonya thought he was flaky. Given how long they had known one another, that wasn't likely to change so it was all just 'if only' kind of thoughts.

Didn't mean Adrik wasn't jealous of Verde's stupidly insane lucky break, but he could see it. They both sucked at peoples. They could suck together and not have one damn issue about that, while thinking they were doing decently well. Probably would compound their separate issues, and he definitely didn't see it lasting the test of time. Still wouldn't mean it was an experience to give miss to.

Just... fuck, he hated the Frenchman's luck. Up until this point it hadn't been a serious bone of contention, Verde had some shitty luck to start their association out with and generally they had pretty much equal experiences with whatever was going on until Adrik got shot through the lung. It had to even out sometime, but... well.

"Adrik. Please be of assistance in answering my question. Preferably concisely."

"She's right. The social structure that forms in student populations are pretty much bullshit." He allowed brightly, because he was that kind of little shit at heart. "I skipped high school, or secondary school, and elementary or first form depending on how you want to term it all. My first encounter with the species known as 'jocks' was... utterly stupid. Almost laughable. Seriously, if I hadn't needed to slide under the radar, I probably would've either beaten them within an inch of their lives or straight out killed them for the whole pack's stupidity in trying to bar my way through a hallway. It's all total shit, shallow as hell, and doesn't apply anywhere else... mostly."

"Mostly." Seized the other man, almost desperately.

He kind of wanted to just laugh until he was sick, but forcing himself over it he cheerfully ruined the only hope Verde probably had to not be horribly mistaken and left adrift in a highly visible social situation without even one sliver of hope to cling to. "The smarter jocks... well. They're a bad experience or two away from becoming something useful or realizing they're fucking shit-heads. Odds are, not going to happen. The shtick of 'pack of tough guys' is a trend they copied from elsewhere, but those tough guys have better understanding of their realistic limits. So yeah. Most those pretty socialites that snubbed you will be middle-aged soccer moms with three kids, the greater bulk of jocks will be factory workers or tradesmen making either minimum wage or blue-collar workers, and there'll be one or two exceptions that make the cut of being successful in ten years... but mostly those geeks you liked to hang out with will become moderately to wildly successful at the same rate as their former bullies because their interests are actually life-long skills they can trade off of. It's not a rule, per say... just really, really fucking likely."

After a moment of stupefied silence, there was a pained groan echoing down the line that made his entire fucking week only a few hours into it. "No."

"Yep. Turns out, sticking a whole lot of kids in an institution generates artificial as hell social structures. Shallow as fuck, utterly inapplicable in the real world, and just is generally confusing to those that skipped the experience rather than a hard and fast rule to live your life with."
Which had been Verde's entire life for… what?

An entire decade?

Probably the moment he left France the first time to study in the States, so fifteen or sixteen or whenever he decided to continue his education after getting his 'rich orphan' status. Man… that was one hell of a wakeup call.

"So yeah. You're rich and successful at twenty-four. Which means… gold-diggers. Of all the luck, man."

There was a long moment of silence, then the Lightning unceremoniously hung up on him with a bit of a slam.

Snickering, Adrik hung up the castle's main phone too. He had to go rescue their new hire from the leftovers of Pavuchky's webbing anyways, he had gotten himself hopelessly tangled in the sticky-strong spider silk and looked to be seriously contemplating if streaking would be good enough to get out of his current situation.

Not something he figured Mingxia, Galina, Ruslana, or Zinaida would appreciate the sight of… then again, Anna might and that could be why she wasn't hovering about the teenager out back.
Chapter 32

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Verde immediately regretted his rare outburst of emotion causing him to slam the phone on Adrik when his bed partners jerked awake.

Sonya shot him an ugly glare for waking her, groggily rolling over while still retaining the use of his left shoulder as a wholly inadequate headrest to merely place her back next to his side and return to sleep. Like his mistress, the canine warily glanced over them both from his position near the foot of the wide bed before tucking himself into a tighter ball and following her example.

As he was not particularly averse to their chosen option to his disturbance, however physically limiting that became for him due to her proximity, Verde irritably palmed the rough stubble grown in on his jawline since he last shaved and wondered what in the name of paleontology could he do about… this.

Aside whatever Sonya and Adrik claimed about how he might be viewed by his peers, that he had not noticed anything significantly off or different in how he was treated casted some significant doubt upon their opinions which prevented him from being forced to accept the claims as absolute fact. As he could not refute their opinions made it unlikely they were entirely incorrect, but he would hold out at least to be sure it was not a mix of their collective assumptions first before resigning himself to their likely less scholastic experiences.

The lesser claim of being a 'bad boy' might in fact be substantiated without much further investigation, as what criteria such a title should imply would in fact be dealings or rumors of dealings with socially undesirable or criminal influences. He did have a significant amount of funds, again, although he was not sure if such a sum amounted to 'rich' as he once knew it.

Glancing to the side, at the blonde peacefully napping on with her temporarily stolen arm for comfort all started with the intent of sharing her body heat with him, he had to admit to some equally significant supporting evidence for 'criminal influences' to be logged for that descriptor's need.

Aside the obvious disastrous end to his academic career most of his peers either had known of prior to his inclusion or after their first meet-and-greet affair due to his attendance and the rumors generated by such, there was both the thief in bed with him and the other thief back home he claimed as a friend to account for.

Whatever the Americans or their criminal factions had spread about the trouble he had within their shores… it could not remotely be close to the truth.

Even he sometimes couldn't comprehend that a lithe, improbably strong woman armed with a weapon comparable to a military pick on an excessive haft physically ripped his prison door open and had him escort her out with her clansman on her shoulder. Nor could most here be aware there was a floating criminal vacation destination with a fully functioning black market hospital on it and he was extracted there instead of some luxury yacht his fellow unknown if also kidnapped student/lab partner owned/could make use of.

Put in another way, Verde knew there was a disconnect between what happened and what was 'known' by others. Even by those that made it their career knowing what most didn't about various incidents within certain shores not their own or otherwise. It was somewhat trickier to apply that
information to what others might assume about the same topic to his information bases while in a conversation, even after experiencing it personally, and account for that when making decisions about how to interact with them.

…it was not usually something he had to account for, usually he spoke to those with the information he wished to know rather than those without insider information.

Again, with the situation of Sonya's deception, what everyone could assume from merely witnessing them together was vastly different from the reality of their relationship… theoretically. His boss was a single mother of a non-teen child and perfectly content to illegally liberate another's possessions and have all the books she could grasp hoarded away in her library, and Verde was perfectly content to read his way through her library and perhaps add a few volumes in his independent investigations if things bore out that way. She paid him a grant to cover specified topics and had given him space within the confines of her home to make his own, he studied various subjects and ordered her investigations for subsequent inquiries that arose.

Given the others of her nationality within the castle staff, Verde's inclusion in her home was apparently a Russian 'culture-thing'. Usov's and Larion's parents all saw nothing strange in their arrangement with Sonya, and Peter had given some limited elucidation for the cultural differences as far as his bare year and a half in Moscow could give.

Aside the base truth of the matter, the impression most here had been left with through her actions/implied information during conversations were of a couple involved for some significant time already before the convention.

That he knew her child to a significant degree of being present for a situation when she was not home, they were currently sharing limited space without issue, Sonya was behaving somewhat affectionate to him in public, and she kept him from foiling her deceptions in spite of his not entirely adequate social skills reinforced the likely assumptions her arrival impressed on his peers to begin with.

In that he had brought her along to 'rub it in' their faces he could catch someone like her, on whatever merit he had supposedly done so.

Which was in fact the impression they were relying on to enable her the leverage to extract him from the seminars in any emergency situation…

…furthermore… she had implied the possibility of 'if it wasn't a lie' when there was no reason to reinforce the deception to observers.

Which then brought up several very important, troubling implications Verde had not given much thought to before as he had not expected the option to be even hinted at.

Starting with the very recent death of her significant other and fellow godparent to Shamal and how it might be impacting her behavior patterns, to the slightly niggling suspicion she intended to utilize his person or personage somehow even if he could not logically postulate how she might find use in what he had that she might not already possess, and further to how she might remotely find it suitable to propose such a thing to him even if only to sound out an option that might be utilized.

Was she merely seeking convenient companionship due to the dearth of such from her fallen compatriot, or was it really not a serious suggestion as it was a 'spit-ball' idea?

The fact she was willing to share body heat with him did not contribute to any theory, the thief was the dutiable sort when it came to her various employees and dependents to the point he hadn't
questioned if she just wished closer contact with another human or was offering to keep him warmer than his impacted health could.

That her intent was to share her excessive internal temperature with him for his own comfort was a motive he could attribute to her... but it might not have been the only one.

Groggily rubbing the heel of the only hand he had free against his right eye, he wondered rather sourly if the woman would be irritated more if he woke her again to answer at least one or two of his questions or if she would be more receptive to clearing up his confusion if he at least waited until she woke on her own.

Deliberating over that question made him rather unaware over what issue, exactly, Alek suddenly took critical exception to. The dog surged to his paws with an alarmed bark before twisting around to confront his mistress' twitching form, the rare vocal emission startlingly loud to the point Verde also flinched from sheer surprise.

As he was startled, an unfortunate amount of Lightning Flames decided to escape his grip on his Flames and crackle across his barred skin. Zapping anything on his person, from putting charring marks into the sheet and even if that something was the former blonde sleeping on his shoulder with his bicep in her grips...

Sonya subsequently released him and jackknifed into a sitting position, her back still to him, coughing a fit to significantly impact her breathing. Wincing under a strong surge of both distaste for whatever the canine found so worrisome and chagrin for causing her such an issue, Verde very nearly started patting her back to help in whatever aim one patted a coughing companion when they were in some distress.

He hesitated with a hand millimeters from his dress shirt from last night when a small, rapidly growing, bloodstain appeared high on Sonya's back as she continued to strain her labored lungs for a breath of air.

...what?

An even harsher series of coughs and some measure of liquid was expelled from the woman's mouth around her fingers, equally a bright and alarming red from what little he could see around her form. It dripped from her hand cupped over her mouth and down her wrist, splattering their duvet and seeping into the sheets as much as it did the sleeve of his ruined shirt.

Sonya was straining to breathe still some critical moments after waking, and Verde literally could not figure out the cause from effect to remove whatever had caused her the trouble. Regardless, he seized the woman around her waist and started to haul her to the bathroom for a more sterile environ for inspection and whatever aid he could perhaps figure out once he had a clearer picture of what was wrong.

He barely caught sight of the elbow in time to Harden his face and skull from her force, as blurry as anything ever was out of the corner of his eye. The impact still jarred him enough he lost grip on her for a moment, however hastily reinforced as he could make himself on demand.

A wide, purple-tinged grey eye inspected him over a shoulder for an achingly long moment they did not have to spare before she suffocated.

Bizarrely, as panicked as she had to be once the inability to breath became apparent and from whatever issue that might be paining her to have been possibly ripped wide open after being healed to cause the bleed, she went boneless in his hands instead of fight him about his implied offer of help
when she was obviously struggling.

Verde was not a robust man, and his lack of physical prowess irritated him somewhat fiercely yet again. Sonya was not a particularly weighty armful for all she could likely atomize the entire hotel or lift it off it's foundation without issue, yet he had to drag more than carry the woman the short distance to the tiny tiled closet of a room.

Alek thankfully did not get in the way, remaining a half-paw away from his mistress' knees as she continued to cough and splutter around tiny gasps of what could not remotely be enough air. Sonya, on the other hand, did make trouble for him.

Catching hold of the counter instead of allowing him to guide her past it and to something she could be seated upon, the woman slammed a heavy and blood coated fist into her chest and finally stopped trying to contain the disquieting amount of blood being expelled from her lungs. The volume of liquid was rather worrisome, not including the noise it made as the bright red blood splattered into the off-white basin as she forced it and whatever little air she had gained out without much mercy to himself or her own situation.

However, she then finally had the lung capacity to haul in a tortured sounding gasp. Leaving herself half slumped over the sink, she simply huddled there somewhat miserably as she attempted to quiet herself and finally just breathe.

Verde sought under the counters, failed to find, and then left her in the bathroom to figure out if she had an even minorly stocked amount of medical supplies to be used in figuring what damage he might've done to her.

Obviously a prior injury, that was either not adequately healed enough or in a delicate state. The blood staining his former dress shirt's back panel was roughly in the place he had noted she had a strange ring-pattered bruise in, it was plausible the involuntary contraction of various muscle groups in reaction to his unintended excess of Lightning Flames tore something open internally.

…filling her lungs with blood. He tried not to grind his back molars together, but as this was the second thief so far aiming to lend him their expertise in non-stealing areas that came down with 'blood in the lungs' due to his involvement…

Given the volume she had to expel, and that there was still more seeping from at least the back injury if not also the matched markings she had on the front of her chest as he could not see it through the amount that dripped onto her more contoured chest to obscure any possible pattern identification, a significant injury.

Did someone spear the woman through the chest?

Had it been a poorly healed gunshot wound?

Furthermore, did a particularly inept Sun utterly fail to ensure her continued good health?

Sonya was a Flame user, she should be fully healed or at least mostly there if a medic of Tatiana's grade had seen to the injury. Not that he had more than Primakova's word about such.

Locating a more than adequate amount of supplies within her own purse of all things, not her luggage, Verde rezipped what appeared to be mainly her monthly supplies for that time of the month as well as several bottles of medicinal liquids for treating injuries and brought it with him back to the lavatory.

By the time he located anything by which he might provide some aid and found a way to step over
her concerned pet's form in the middle of the bathroom doorway, Sonya had slithered out of his dress shirt and mostly corrected her poor posture over the blood splattered sink. She was also liberally applying a wetted cloth to her skin with the aim of sloughing off the remainder sticking to her skin in order to inspect the damages done. Awkwardly trying to ignore the woman's state of dress, or her lack of it without seemingly much care to any possible discomfort he might have with the same upon his return, Verde noted Alek had his shirt in his jaws and seemed to find some issue with the cloth given how quickly he was ripping it to shreds in his distress.

Aside a new significantly sized bruise, caused by her own fist squarely between her… assets, there was not an open rent in her skin on her front meaning the thick red liquid was likely from the blood that leaked into her lungs and she did not require his attention there. Through the mirror the older ringed bruise did in fact look inflamed, but aside a new puffiness to the translucent patch of skin in the middle and the darkening of her older bruises there was not anything else too alarming or freshly torn open injuries to tend.

She was not against his taking possession of the washcloth to investigate her back, but she also did not seem all that sure why he brought her medical supplies in with him given her preoccupation when accepting the contained pouch.

Then Verde finally noticed that, under the layer of drying blood, it did not appear as if there was an open injury on her back to account for the bloodstain he had observed in his former shirt. Two light as possible swipes with the equally ruined cloth informed him that no, there was not an injury to be tended.

"So..." Sonya somewhat roughly posed into the bewildered silence, still leaning most of her weight on the counter and peering over a colorful shoulder instead of utilizing the mirror to see him clearly. "...I told you there was a risk of stains."

Running the cause and effect through his mind for the fourth time since he noticed, he could not comprehend how she ended up bleeding when he knew for a fact she had and yet end up without the compromised injuries to explain such. Squinting to improve his rather impaired eyesight did not reveal anything that could explain why she suddenly discharged a bewildering volume of her own bodily fluids through her upper back. "...what."

"Cloud Voodoo."

"...that makes little sense."

"Propagation, as in to make more." She rather broadly gestured to her upper body, not caring a whit if he caught an eyeful of her barred chest as she turned halfway around to reach past him and snag hold of a fresh towel from the rack supplied to guests. "With fine enough control… even things as tiny as a cell can be Propagated to a usable volume. Hence, Voodoo. I'm trying to learn, it's a little… tricky. I occasionally forget."

Deeming that suitable enough of an explanation without bothering to await his response, the dratted woman then went about running herself a shower as if he wasn't still standing there. After wrenching on the water before he could fully process the claim and implications, she then wiggled out of the shorts she had been wearing and proving she really wore nothing under her nightwear.

Additionally, despite trying not to notice… the 'carpets' did not in fact match the 'drapes', as some number of other men he had conversed with might term it. Obviously she dyed the majority of her hair, but had not seen the deception through to every part of her.

Verde did not like the suspicions he was left with as he somewhat hastily removed himself from the
small cubical of a room so she could recover herself in privacy, even if he could not quite shut the door between them due to a third entity to account for.

If this was the way Primakova theorized Adrik's injury could be repaired, then indeed someone had to learn how to do it to apply to another. Testing on a willing subject or one's self were preferable to testing on the unwilling… however.

Suffering an injury that went through her chest in order to learn a high-risk health related skill was not a controlled or safe laboratory experiment. Frankly, replicating a pig’s lung in a setting such as his labs would do them all more benefit than risking suffocation or spontaneous bleeding issues while in public.

Squeezing the badly drenched bloody cloth in his hands in aims of relocating the bulk of the mess to it from where she unintentionally bled on him as that required removal first before he readied himself for the day, Verde glanced down at the forlorn animal with his head poked into the bathroom with the rest of his body very firmly planted next to the doorjamb around the slab of hollow wood masquerading as a door. The position looked profoundly awkward, as well as only a recipe to suffer neck injury if someone unwisely knocked on the door even accidentally.

Alek apparently knew what was going on, enough so to sound a warning when the woman 'forgot'. More than enough to know that at least once awake she would tend to the issue, as he was not crowding the woman or further giving voice to any continued distress.

Thus, 'forgetting' had occurred multiple occasions before. Enough so the animal had deemed waking his mistress his duty whenever such occurred even if he did not wish to lose sight of her in the aftermath.

Verde did not trigger the 'forgetting', as the animal barked before he possibly unintentionally shocked the woman awake. Regardless his involuntary reaction might not have helped her any, and indeed given how quickly she vaulted herself into a sitting position instead of remaining in a relaxed unstrained position to deal with her breathlessness it likely meant his shocking her had complicated the issue.

…Sonya was 'forgetting' in her sleep. However many nights she had gone without 'forgetting' already made it impressive in a purely cold and clinical way, although he was of the opinion she should've informed him of her injury and the risky/complication prone fix some time shortly after he asked rather than be assured it was a 'biological process'.

Bleeding, from rents in one's dermis or internally, was not natural enough to be deemed such.

Furthermore, this application of Cloud Flames was not her initial one if she required practice. It was another's.

Theoretically, given her opinion of 'there would not be another skill one was as good with as the initial ability', there was likely another with a greater grasp on the skill she had learned the possibility from. She did not need to risk her internal integrity, that other…

…might not be of a nature to be helpful. Or perhaps said individual, still theoretical Cloud Flame user, would not be able to hold something as complex as a lung fully for whatever needs Tatiana would demand in order to turn a Propagated organ into a real piece of flesh able to replace compromised natural organs. Possibly the individual was not trustworthy, or not predisposed to be amenable in applying their trait to another on request.

Additionally, taking into consideration the injury pattern around whatever insult had been done to
Sonya's flesh, her internal systems were not adjusting to the so-dubbed 'Voodoo' well.

…or she had 'forgotten' enough to otherwise complicate the natural healing process in any one of uncountable ways and there was a significant complication developed she was ignoring.

Discarding the soiled scrap of cloth to land on the remains of his former dress shirt at the dog's paws, who then tried to destroy any evidence his mistress had been harmed as with his previous garment, Verde turned his attention to dressing for the day with haste as he turned the entire situation over in his head to see if there were implications he had not thoroughly examined.

He wondered, in a way he knew for sure she would not appreciate, if she would mind remaining in bed or at least asleep for the remaining day and a half of the conference. She caused him less trouble and concerns when she was insensible, aside where she chose to seek rest at though that matter should be resolved, furthermore he had yet to get any of his early morning inquires settled in any satisfying method before her 'forgetting' heaped yet more on top of. Even if she really should be recuperating her health instead of minding his safety from yet more violent thugs that had different ideas about Verde's future employment than what they had worked out, he did not believe she would appreciate the suggestion.

If he could not directly offer or suggest the 'easier' option with any percentage of success… then could he somehow arrange it to make recuperating within their hotel room more palpable to her than hunting around a conference center with the aim of guarding him unseen from the shadowy corners that could not be conductive to recovering from a significant injury?

She had put in place the deception of their relationship being more personal than business, and while he has spent three days so far attending the workshops and lectures he had not done much if anything to help her support the assumption for his protection. Once someone held an opinion it was difficult to change it without shattering any preconceptions around whatever topic first, and most did not appreciate that occurring at all, resulting to mean his lack of involvement likely was not a great trouble to her aims therefore he had not given much thought to how to reinforce her cover story even when he doubted it's validity.

Even if in the end the 'relationship' was as shallow as a lie, and there was not in fact an offer for more available either now or in time, at the very least he could put some time to doing what she might find a worthwhile investment of her time this day and finally putting some effort into her deceptions. While nuclear sciences were interesting and he found the aims of the conference a direction to support, he privately doubted such were at all possible in this era of Cold War therefore a few hours spent in another aim would not damage any effort he might put forth in CECAM's desired aim.

Such would also 'cover' his very 'wooden' reactions to her lie, if he was not there to react poorly to her flirtations then no one could guess the underlying reality of their situation.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Sonya outright dithered more than long enough in the shower to the point it turned lukewarm, scrubbing off both the blood and whatever half-forgotten nightmare she had just before Verde's rather prickly wake up call about her not breathing issue.

Then, after more than enough time to feel like an absolute bitch and bitterly regretting everything, she gathered up her shit and went to go see what the damages were.
Even after getting whacked in the head with an elbow backed by the force of a speeding train behind it, Verde hadn't *acted* like she did any damage or resented her for hitting him in the first place. The fact he *still had a head* after she hit him meant he got his Lightning Flames up in time, thankfully. However head injuries were tricky like that, one moment you could be totally fine and five minutes later be completely brain-dead because of something like *internal brain bleed*.

Yes, she *had* looked all this up in various libraries around the world and then in the entire section in her personal library Hawk purchased to figure out his personal problems. Head injuries plus her brother's undying skills equaled a nightmare she didn't want to face but prepared for it anyways because they could not be that lucky.

So… she *really shouldn't be* putting this off anymore. The Lightning had a big enough brain, any more and there'd start to be serious problems with keeping him at least directed in a way that wouldn't kill him from getting into too contentious subjects. Or… be dead, and then quite a few people would be really fucking pissed with her.

Starting with Adrik, ending with Shamal.

Nudging the very worried Alek out of her way as gently as she could, Sonya risked a quick glance over the now dressed man she was *supposed* to be keeping safe… not knocking the block off of.

Before she could even hope to figure out something to say to gain his attention, the Lightning started speaking without even glancing at her as he fitted his watch to his wrist. "*I seem to require a number of blank notebooks, as such I may as well collect some provisions for our morning meal. As long as I gather Hawk's assistance, I presume you will not object?"*

"…uh, well… no-" "*Any particular need you required fulfilled as of this moment?"*

For him to shut up for a second, perhaps. Knowing full well saying such would be highly rude to an individual she had already wronged rather grievously, Sonya bit that back.

Taking ruthless advantage of her disinclination to speak, Verde snatched the key to the hotel room from the dresser provided as furniture and was already by the door before he turned to her one last time. "*I do not believe Alek would consent, however would you like me to attempt to walk your pet before I go snag a bodyguard as you maintain I require?"*

"…he won't go with anyone else, not in this mood."

"*I had suspected, therefore I shall return momentarily."* With that, he was out the door and she was left with a mopey canine and her own thoughts.

*I'm sorry, it was not okay to hit you. I forgot you were there, and I kind of panicked when you grabbed me."* Sonya, rather inanely, got out three seconds too late to the hotel room empty of the one she had intended to tell all this to. "*Not that I'm trying to make excuses... thank you for being fucking indestructible and... not dying. I guess..."*

Well… he *seemed* okay. Walking, talking, and as long as someone was there to catch the man if there turned out to be some kind of injury she dealt him it should be fine.

Alek licked her kneecap, giving her sad puppy eyes when she glanced down to see what he wanted. Aside his morning walk because while she had free access to a bathroom for her needs, he had to rely on her ability to open doors with her opposable thumbs to empty his bladder.
And she took a shower instead of give him a second of thought.

Wow, she just thoroughly sucked this morning. As a person, a pet owner, and as a Cloud Flame user. "I can't really blame him, honestly. I don't want to be around me right now either."

Her dog then proved he was as much a contrary little shit as she could be and pressed his chest against her still very wet leg, feebly batting his tail twice before letting it fall still but otherwise seemingly perfectly happy to be around her.

"Yeah, you're going to look innocent when I can clearly see the mess you made out... of... shit." She apparently owed Verde a new shirt, too... "Grab your leash, I refuse to mope, so we're going to catch up with that jackass so he can listen to my apology."

Alek very fell over he was that surprised at her sudden energy and her moving her leg to get dressed too, but Sonya didn't give him much more attention. She was in the wrong, and as she said to that headmaster asshole that meant she had to fix it. Even if Verde didn't want to hear it or see her right now.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. Toulouse, French Republic.)

"So... what's with the Russian?"

Verde jerked his head up, examining the man who spoke to him more than the purchases in his hands. "Monsieur Lanthier?"

"Verninac, good morning and all that. What's her deal?" Pressed the mathematician, accepting his change back from the cashier and tucking it away into a pocket before more obviously joining his fellow countryman away from the building line intending to exchange sums of currency for prepared food items as well. "You almost never see them outside of the Soviet Union... unless they're up to something."

"Indeed? She was the second one I ever met, the sister of a friend's friend." He allowed, absently noticing Hawk's movement around the storefront to end up behind Verde when the two of them exited the store as it didn't seem the other man minded conversing while moving. Which coincided with his aims without any unnecessary effort involved, meaning he didn't mind the topic even if he was not very interested in speaking on it yet again. "Before you ask, no I have not made her brother's acquaintance. They have another sibling, making rapid progress to a doctorate in medical sciences while working as a nurse practitioner, that I have met."

"Hmm, well. Interesting." Allowed the other man after a moment's thought, opening the bakery's doors with his back instead of turn away from Verde to do so. "The siblings aren't what I'm interested in, but your little lady herself. History buff?"

"Indeed. Her library's strongest two points is now split between history volumes from around the world, and high science-fantasy from her homeland. I've read a significant percentage of it, and her current work involves a significant effort to document a portion of her native land's pre-Communist era."

At the very least, that was all Galina informed him of when he inquired what task had the privilege of her time more than his instruction as a fellow Lightning.

"How many books are you talking about? Because I've got a stupid amount of meteorological charts..."
"She could very well open her home up as a public or university-level library documenting Slavic history alone and have no concerns any would find it lacking." Not that he expected the entirely unapologetically greedy woman to do so, the scowls he got for merely perusing her collection for something to do back on Mafia Land were not remotely encouraging. "For what reason do you inquire?"

"Just a topic you don't seem to mind as much as any others I've seen plied in your direction," Confessed Lanthier, almost more an afterthought than as a direct answer as he fiddled with his wallet.

Verde blinked slowly, confused as the man stuffed his change into a front pocket rather than pull out a wallet but didn't find it important enough to comment upon. "Indeed…"

"Anyways. I've a question of a meteorological bent, and while I know you signed an NDA for whatever you're up to these days I'm more interested in what you'd make of a couple very curious weather-phenomena I've been asked to look over."

"Sounds fascinating, although I feel such must be covered at a later time…" Mainly because Hawk had moved further along the street to converse with Sonya out walking Alek, meaning the woman he had wanted to keep in today was out and about. While the phrasing sounded suggestive enough, the other man was known to be a bit of a sky-watcher and it had to mean the request was innocen-

Verde was not expecting the rude shove into a side street, nor further hands that grabbed him without permission and the two sharp points jabbed into his stomach. A reflexive Hardening, mainly utilized to keep the moderate sized if flimsy carryall made of plastic from tearing, kept him relatively unstabbed much to the annoyance of his assailants.

Physically immune to damage or not, he could not counter the subsequent shove that finished the work the first had started with keeping him unbalanced and had him falling most of the way into an unmarked van. Further hands seized him and hauled him further inside to make room for another man with the mathematician that ambushed him with such, the semi-public location preventing any overt usage of Flames to ensure his kidnappers utterly regretted even existing.

Now vastly irritated, he corrected the position of his glasses and gave his abductors a flat look each. "I fail to understand what aim you hope to accomplish with such actions and advise you to either run further or prepare for a truly one-sided beat down."

"Verninac, seriously. Shut up." Lanthier rather bitterly advised, gingerly sliding around the Lightning's form in aims of obtaining a seat with restraints himself instead of be part of those keeping him pinned to the less than sanitary floor of the vehicle. "Just, fuck man. I don't know what you did, but maybe try apologizing for it."

"Indeed? Should I apologize for existing?"

"Shut. Up. And you- FUCK!" Scrambling backwards, one of Verde's assailters very nearly got the sharp end of queerly gunmetal grey pick slammed into his head as it shot through the side of the van without much care to its composition of metal padded with plastic.

Verde kept himself low, readjusting the breakfast he had purchased to not spill out of the packaging and all over the containers with how rough the trip was likely to be before the end. He also planted a foot to brace his lengthy form, just in case of any unexpected halts.

A subsequent pick entered the opposite side of the van, from the angle he could see around other forms and panicking movements indicated that a fairly ticked off Storm-Cloud was riding the top of
the van utilizing the weapons as a rudimentary safety hold.

Likely in broad daylight, while they were all speeding down a motorway. How did she expect to get away with that?

…or did the woman keep hold of one of the failed glass-scale results, that the Mirror Lady had enchanted for Lady Vongola's dance lessons?

More plausible. Meaning there was a Mist, and any overt use of Flames would be concealed.

Ignoring the sudden confusion and terror mysteriously, or not so mysteriously, appearing medieval weaponry were causing his attackers… Verde instead kept his attention on his fellow if highly reluctant conference attendee. Seemingly forgotten, shoved rather rudely aside, too roughly to be associated with this outfit as he was with Sonya's, meaning another very unwilling 'civilian' taken advantage of to complicate any instant revenge.

Without an expert instructor at hand he was seeking instruction from, Verde liked to preform to his own expectations.

Planting a hand on the dirt-smeared grooved rubber under his back, the Lightning started summoning as much Flame to his palm as he felt safe to utilize. Although synthetic rubber, or any artificial elastomer for that matter, held little to no faults that could be weak points in any attempt to electrify the vehicle and possibly disrupt the operation of… there was the saturation point to contend with. Namely, how many volts a material could withstand before allowing a current through regardless of natural resistance.

Verde did not require a significant amount, merely a trickle would be enough to overcharge the battery of the vehicle and start a chain reaction resulting in the cessation of operation. His trickle of Lightning and another's differed greatly, undoubtedly… but it was minor for him and therefore less of a risk to heap onto his already impacted metabolic needs.

Indeed, his seeking fingers found a screw anchoring the material under his back to the body of the van which was a phenomenally better option than risking whatever carcinogens would be released by boiling or charring plastics. Once the battery ran through the extra power, it would either die from the strain of containing the excessive volts or explode as the electricity exceeded any internal buffers and boiled both the sulfuric acid and water mix to the point of forming hydrogen gas.

Including in the electrical system he was targeting was the power steering, the mechanical assistance used to turn the wheel of the vehicle without undue strain on the operator. The failure of the spark plugs would be the next obvious result he was aiming for, which would also end any immediately possible operation of the getaway vehicle and prevent his relocation.

Releasing his Flames before his sabotage was noticed, the Lightning rather impatiently waited out the rest of the 'hijacking' with ill-grace. Already planning out what to speak of when Sonya was confronted with his traitorous fellow attendee.

More probable than just malicious intent, Lanthier likely was targeted for once assisting them with a social situation in a rather open-attendance breakfast meeting once. It did not seem as if he had an informed position in this group, indeed it appeared more as if he was a very marginalized 'disposable tool' left to flounder now they had what aim they were after however contentious the result was. As he could plausibly reason some benefit of doubt for the man, Verde started calculating how to protect the other if the situation deteriorated any further.
"No, no! The next exit!" The driver swerved the entire oversized contraption, making Verde slide around somewhat painfully with as much limited movement he was allowed under the feet of his captors.

Worse, it caused one of the picks that indicated his boss was hitching a ride and not leaving him even for a few moments to his own devices in a hostile hostage situation slide out of the van's thin walls. His captors realized the same a few beats after he did, and one yelled for the driver to start swerving to 'shake off whatever the fuck that is!'

He immediately regretted his words when the pick intruded yet again, barely missing his temple as it punctured through the roof of the vehicle instead this time.

To make the situation even more contentious, someone then finally recalled they were armed themselves. Wildly and blindly firing into the ceiling, Verde cringed from more than just the ringing in his ears when something very red and liquid started leaking inside.

Then apparently Sonya's patience with the entire farce ended, and the woman ended up ripping off the van's roof with little care to the seat belts most of the men inside were wearing and now were secured to a ballistic piece of metal skipping along after the vehicle. Dropping inside without landing on the Lightning through some grace of skill, the now lavender-eyed woman subsequently punched out everyone that so much as looked at her wrong.

Including one Dione Lanthier, mathematician and weather-watching hobbyist, who very clearly did not realize there were supernaturally gifted individuals that could do such a thing bare handed.

Punching her hand through the wired mesh intending to keep the cargo area separated from the driver's cab, the thief ripped out the man sitting in the front passenger's seat through the flimsy barrier and tossed him negligibly to slam into the rear bay doors. "You. Stop this fucking car. Or get booted out a running van at highway speeds. Pick. One."

The man she pulled through wire fencing was not quite insensible, groggy for sure with a probable concussion, so Verde put his foot into the man's face with a little more frustration than he really felt.

"Sorry I took so long, Gilles. I had to summon Anna for the reasonable cover." The thief needlessly informed him tiredly, readjusting how she was leaning against the mesh to account for the bloody hole in her left pants leg. "Bear with it for a few more moments, and I'll send you to the hotel with Hawk while I finish up here."

"…given the concerns at hand, and the rapidity of response in the end, understandable." Allowed the Lightning dryly, offering her the worse sugar-laced monstrosity from his morning shopping that could likely help her more than pointing out his observations about her state of health.

It was studded with berries, technically it could masquerade as a whole serving of fruit alone.

The bloodstain on her leg was not growing. Which he was equally as glad of as he was suspicious.

Verde could confirm tonight if the ring-bruised injury pattern was a gunshot wound covered by 'Cloud Voodoo', and he could always deal with a small delay before his questions were confirmed so long as he obtained correct information later.

Not that he had much idea what about the situation he could realistically do, but proposing an alternative possibility to deliberate or careless self-harm and even possibly the refusal to seek treatment should only improve the situation overall.

Instead of accepting the calorically dense pastry, the woman grimaced and shook her head. "I can't
eat right now, but if you feel the need go right ahead."

He did not want the overly heavy breakfast item, he purchased the likely intended for tourists muffin so the woman could make up at least a little of whatever she lost this morning reapplying her Flames to suspicious old injuries. Glucose and carbohydrates made up a significant part of the energy a body went through in a day, and while too much excess when it was not needed was harmful too little when you had equally as little in your system could be similarly so.

Which she was exacerbating with her antics now, however he appreciated her protection as he sought for a good part of a year. Verde would appreciate her protection continuing past this one incident, he felt confident in assuming the rest of her household would share in the sentiment as well.

The van finally came to a proper, safe halt on the side of the highway before he could figure out a proper compromise about her wish not to eat and him applying the recently learned information on Flame user metabolic rates to calculating out exactly how much energy she just burned right through to not lose him to unknown others.

Sonya did not show much mercy for the fear-induced compliance, reaching an arm through the man-sized hole she had already made to wrap her arm around the driver's throat and render him unconscious by asphyxiation instead of blunt force trauma. The moment the man stopped struggling at the arm or attempting to escape he was likely already forgotten, as the thief chivvied him out of the van as if he was the most grievously insulted party of the situation.

"Wait, Sonya, Lanthier-

"Is fucked. End of story."

"He should not be." Verde attempted to stress as she somehow got him out of the van, with their breakfast still in his hands, and halfway to the likely illegally liberated car Hawk was pulling the young and slightly exhausted looking Anna out of without allowing the distressed canine to free himself as well. "From all appearances, he was merely a tool-

"And it's not going to matter, Gilles. Just… fuck, forget him. There's literally little I can realistically do to mitigate the world of shit he got himself into. Knowingly gotten himself into this or not, I'm about to involve an entity that will not remotely care." Now ignoring him and any possible continuation on the topic, the infuriating thief focused on the young teen awaiting her orders. "Anna, if you're too tired you can swap out. You were just the only one I knew I could get a hold of quick enough without a phone line."

"Please, milady. And miss out?"

"I know for a fact you used Usov as a power source to even get here, Anna. Containing a highway rampage must have strained you a little bit, if not a lot, and I'm going to need a bit more help later today. If Usov is willing and able, I'd actually rather appreciate if you'd play me for the rest of the morning so I'd have an alibi."

The Mirror Lady's already dark blue eyes gleamed unnaturally for a moment, and then the young woman directed her gaze down into a suddenly appearing heirloom silver hand mirror Verde's mother would've been ecstatic to find had she been alive…

"Young Shamal is very willing to be relocated to do your bidding, milady. Usov will simply play long-distance power source yet again." Allowed the Mist, drawing the Lightning out of his seemingly random recollection of his mother's habits. "I think I shall take your offer."
"While I wouldn't mind… I need Shamal to cover for both Usov and you, and Usov was the one to express interest in the topic I'm about to kick wide open. My brat is the only one that can cover for both of you at the same time, until I can send you back home."

"Of course, milady." Anna then switched appearances, taking on a significantly less strained or slightly blood splattered guise that would fool even those that had interacted with the older woman into believing the younger was the elder. Without the gunshot wound or, he still suspected, the other injuries Sonya was denyind via willpower alone. "Anything else?"

"Not really. I think that's about all I care about." She accepted the hand poking through the mirror holding doppelganger's accessory, pulling the next Mist out of a reflection. "Alright brat, ready to help me ruin a whole lot of peoples' days?"

"Yes!" Usov agreed with her brightly, then belatedly noticed her less than intact state due to the blood-crusted hole through her lower left thigh and very nearly panicked until he got a very good look at the injury.

Verde fairly itched to inspect the site and see if his theories held truth to them. The child, while suspicious of the site, did not deem it important enough to raise as a topic to their boss…

His distraction enabled Sonya to gain a grip on his shirt and roughly shove him towards Hawk and the disguised Anna trying to coax the highly bewildered and confused Alek into tolerating her for a short while. "Go back to the hotel, Gilles. Put that other guy's fate out of your mind."

"Sonya, I feel I must insist about Lanthier's-"

"For fuck's sake." Snapped the woman irritably, turning still burning purple eyes on him and looking entirely too tired for him to really wish contesting the point further if she refused point blank again. "Is this really that damn important to you?"

"While personally, there is some motivation I will admit to… there is also the suspicion my attendance has been treated to from the very beginning. An unexplained disappearance of another attendee will cast a shadow under whatever future attendances you foresee I might be invited to. If not because I believe he was merely targeted due to rendering us assistance, then-"

"It might just not be possible. If not, oh well." She decided shortly, gesturing to the preteen child to proceed her to the van to accomplish whatever aim she had with his former kidnappers. "You're going to have to make due."

…why was she speaking as if she was not the one about to hand out retribution?

"Hawk, tell what's his face that I'll count this as his bonus if Verde comes to no further trouble for the rest of the day. He can do whatever after that, stick it out or leave. Gilles, attend your damn conference and just generally be seen today. Safely." Sonya ordered over a shoulder as she took the spot the insensible driver she knocked out prior had formerly occupied. "Anna, try not to confuse the hell out of Alek."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. Toulouse, French Republic.)

"He's awake."

"Really now, Monsieur Lanthier. We're waiting on you."
Dione gave up pretending he wasn't really here, tugging absently at the restraints keeping his hands behind his back. There was a young boy who apparently ratted him out to Verninac's girlfriend, sitting next to her on a... single... length of wooden fencing some distance away from the road.

Glancing past the two, he could see slivers of some body of water past them. Which did not quite make sense, as he could clearly hear rushing water behind him and if that was the Garonne River... what was past them?

"Now here's the thing, Monsieur Lanthier. If you don't have a sob story, I will not bother to do what Gilles wants and protect you from whatever comes next." Promised the brunette shortly, redirecting his attention back to them instead of his surroundings. "As a matter of fact, even with a personal sob story I might not be able to do anything about your more than likely horrific fate for throwing in your lot with these idiots."

"...after the last couple days I've had, what the hell makes you oh so sure I want to talk about it?"

The woman held out a hand, empty for only a second, which then was suddenly filled with a weapon straight out of the history books. She tipped it so the beak end of her polearm tipped his head back, allowing him to fully appreciate the fact it was solid and real enough to hurt him if he mouthed off more and she didn't like it. "Because you've got no other choice but to risk me or risk the unknown."

"You are unknown." Dione reminded her pointedly, taking the utterly casual violation of the conservation of mass at face value as he had no idea of the trick she had to make it seem like the entirely oversized weapon appeared from nothing. "What, exactly, do you think the difference between you and these assholes is?"

"The fact you know one of my people, you would recall him as Verninac. He's alive, isn't he? Protected, well-off, able to live unfettered by the very assholes you were helping. Against your best attempt." She tapped her sharp weapon against his cheekbone, then gestured to the line of strangely silent thugs seemingly trying to hold still and not attract more of her attention sitting next to him. "So. Pick a side. Gilles insisted that I interfere on your behalf, but if you don't give me an even half-assed excuse for this bullshit... I won't bother. I don't need more problem issues to tend to. Besides, I'm not the one that got you involved in this."

"You're not going to just call the police, are you?"

"Well... in a matter of speaking... I am. Just not the police you are familiar with." De Mort countered humorlessly, a grim smirk painting itself across her lips to go with the sudden shock of red that flashed through her grey eyes that leeched into a truly disturbing light purple. "You have five seconds, so answer me quick or live with the consequences."

...what consequences?

Dione had ensured everything he did could be defended in a court of law as self-defense. Not particularly very morally just, but reasonable compliance to just safeguard himself at the expense of another...

"Five."

Then again, he knew full well from the start he was probably screwed. Complying to either terminally or otherwise to the detriment of another person was rather dimly looked upon.

"Four."
And this tiny-assed little woman somehow, while the van was at highway speeds, ripped off the top of a commercial vehicle. To get her boyfriend back.

"Three."

He glanced from the woman and child, to the line of equally contained outright criminals that blackmailed him into this restrained just like he was.

"Two."

"I've got... a habit."

She did not remotely look impressed. "Drugs?"

"Gambling."

"Card shark then, did you try counting them?"

"They didn't say not to," Dione defended himself waspishly. "I've always been careful to not get myself into more debt than I can afford in three months, but that night I got in over my head. It was supposed to be just a throw away game in a bar one night..."

"Likely you were specifically targeted. If not you, I'd be having this discussion with someone else about their dirty little habits... so was just the card game's debt what they have on you?"

"...I don't quite remember. They didn't really do much but imply, but the debt's enough for me to lose my job and any hope I'd have to pay it off if they just make it known in the right circles." Suspicious they'd ruin his life just for laughs or not, the mere possibility they'd keep their traps shut was his only damn hope.

She then, oddly enough, glanced to the side at the kid. Said child tilted his head, then brown eyes bled an unholy dark blue. "He really doesn't recall. I suspect, from what's left behind, he was drugged to compliance or unconsciousness. Either through spiked alcohol content in his drinks, or an actual drug picked to closely mimic overdinking."

"Well," she allowed dryly while he was trying to figure out how the kid spoke so confidently on something he only suspected and didn't breathe word of yet, "that's a whole lot less objectionable than just sheer stupidity. Idiotic, but idiotic in a way I can at least use. Suppose I'll ask, then. Can't hurt, then I can tell Gilles I at least tried."

Jarringly, the kid cheered with excitement at her words. "I'm ready when you are, Dama."

"Officer of the Vindice, I have charges to bring forth." De Mort spoke, strangely enough to the sky, causing the other men sitting on his left side to all flinch in tandem.

Well, to be fair, Dione also flinched when something dressed in way too many bandages and a black suit melted up out of the ground. Completely bandaged face, a top hat strangely enough, and dripping black chains from both sleeves.

Someone started gibbering in pure fear, and he was a little afraid it might've been him.

"Present. Your. Evidence."

"The men behind you are, mostly, the agents of Monsieur Paul. They attempted the unlawful seizure of one of my Lightnings, with their head's permission apparently according to the information this
Mist mined out of their heads. I present the law of Factors for consideration; I have eleven users of Dying Will Flames to my household... they have none."

The... thing, canted its head to the side. "List. Your. Users."

"Myself, my godson, one Galina the Lightning, one Peter McScruffy the Sun, Usov here next to me, Anna the Mirror Lady covering my attendance elsewhere, Verde the Lightning, one Larion the Rain, Hawk the Storm, Sōng Mingxia the Rain on loan from the Triads via her brother's permission and while I'm not sure if she counts... there is also my brother and dual Guardian Prospect Skull de Mort and his Rainy minion."


"If, we can, may I request Monsieur Lanthier's punishment to be defaulted to my Lightning he attempted to inconvenience? He's civilian, mostly. Only realized today that there might be something else out there." Tried the woman in a complete deadpan, red eyes sliding to him once before turning back to the monstrosity she summoned out of nothing with apparently the just right words. "Obviously, I will be accepting responsibility for him if so."

There wasn't really much of a response, or at least none Dione heard. Those black chains suddenly had a life of their own and lashed out at not only him but the other men as well.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. Toulouse, French Republic.)

Sonya mentally planned on how to break the news to Verde that his fellow attendee would not be returning, apparently. "Officer, Lady Vongola also wished a question to be conveyed and hopefully answered. Is it Omertà you police, or do you police Omertà to prevent another Mafia War?"

There was a pause, but not an answer as the Vindice Officer finished dragging his terrified victims into his black hole of a portal.

She kind of got, given the halting way this Officer spoke, he and/or she didn't like talking very much.

Which was fine with her, trying to use her Storm Flames to burn through the creeping fear sensation utterly fucking failed so she was getting really fucking twitchy. Far more than she wanted to be when she had little brats to mind and yet more social shit to disguise how much of a cluster fuck this whole morning was.

Hopefully this Officer was the French or middle Europe assigned one, or the one watching the Milieu organizations for compliance, and she wouldn't need to bother it more.

Usov wrapped tiny arms around her thigh, apparently now trying to not flee either or just needing to hold onto something more solid than the fence he Constructed into existence. He also, very noticeably, didn't bug this one for it's name either.

The whole van went the same way as her temporary prisoners, sucked into a black hole in the ground without much ceremony. The Officer drifted around in a slow circle, apparently checking they got every little sliver of metal from the ground and there was nothing aside disturbed dirt on this riverside track she snuck the whole assemblage down for the privacy.

Then it turned to her silently.
After a pause, she slowly volunteered some more information just to prevent the damned thing from straining its vocal cords to ask whatever it wanted. "I'll be in the city for at least another twenty-four hours. Just long enough to start sending my people home in a non-hurried way to avoid alarming any law enforcement watching us. Then, if you have further questions or concerns, any communications can be left in the far back office of the ground floor of my brother's and my castle or with my Lackey in Mafia Land if an immediate response is more desired."

It remained still, questionably staring at her given she couldn’t see anything but where its nose was generally pointed at, then just went through the ground much as Usov might if he were bored of what was going on and sensed a mischief opportunity elsewhere.

"I heard that." Said Mist still clinging to her leg informed her snottily, apparently vastly recovered the instant the Officer left them to their own devices. "Now what?"

She kind of wondered who he mind-fucked for the French. Was it Hawk, Verde, or just some random passerby?

"Well… now there’s an entire headquarters' worth of furniture and furnishings around here… completely empty of any owners if I guessed what would happen if the Vindice got involved correctly. Imagine that."

"Do you think they'd mind if we borrowed a few things we might still be missing?"

"I don't think they're in a position to argue about it." Sonya allowed dryly, kind of wishing the kid would stop gripping that leg specifically so hard. It kind of really stung from the third gunshot wound she had this summer. "Do me a favor, Usov. Take your father and Larion's dad to go browse their shit real quick before the carrion pickers figure out there's stuff left unguarded. You will not be using any of it before Adrik has a chance to inspect each piece, but… as it’s just sitting there free for the taking…"

Usov pointedly planted his pointy chin directly on the not-really-there exit wound on the top of her left thigh, ignoring the mostly dried blood crusting the fabric of her pants. "What about you?"

"…I need to think up an excuse to give Gilles about why that jackass isn’t with me."

"Outside your hotel it is." Vowed the slightly bratty little Mist flatly, instead of warping her around with barely enough permission to not get in trouble he opened one of his portal things in mid-air showing a shaded view of the hotel she had been staying at. "Dama, you require a hospital. Not a few kilometers walk back to where you've set up for the time being."

"I require a visit to St. Julian's. Not just any hospital."

"Are you going to go?" He inquired curiously as he finally released her, brushing off little flakes of her blood from his lower face.

"…no. Not yet."
Chapter 33

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

One Monsieur Paul had some semi-respectable real estate for being a middling-ineffective crime boss, not being part of either the Traditional Milieu or the French Corsican Mafia but bridging something in between. He must have thought his fortunes were changing when the phenomenally strong if willy weapon making Lightning from earlier in the year suddenly popped up in his backyard attending some civilian shindig, and likely gave his goon-squad orders to bring in the man at all costs to improve their 'standing' among their fellow French criminals.

Sonya leafed idly though the man's paperwork, skimming in a kind of exhausted way over the information taken from his office and left to her to sort in the comfort of a middling-class hotel suit by Usov.

The damn brat.

Probably an effort to ensure she didn't make her injuries worse, even if she had intended to sleep the morning away, but she was the only one that had the experiences to read the papers and put them into a usable context so she didn't greatly mind. Besides, there were things she could learn from it that would only be useful in the next couple days.

There was nothing very interesting mentioned in them, the French were a bit of an overly romantic lot that had way too much interest in prostitution and were slowly getting back into bank robberies. The paperwork for this syndicate indicated it was either in the middle of a focus-shift or left to be more logistical due to pure need for one in the local area. There were only a couple handful of her fellow thieves hailing from the country in Mafia Land, most else of what was left here was all drug-trade shit she wasn't interested in and Monsieur Paul's lot had only the local racketeering and a few underground fences to their names.

It wasn't all that great as a glimpse into a slice of the French Mafia lifestyle… she knew a bit of fences due to the sheer necessity a thief had for them, and beyond the situationally specific incidents between French syndicates she had more than enough familiarity with how uneasily two middling syndicates kept the peace between them from her time as a Zolotov.

The paperwork painted a picture of an organizational, not combat or heavy assault or even thief-orientated, criminal syndicate. Supporting the trade of violence, a fully involved level of protecting Omertà, not necessarily committing the crimes but enabling the evasion of law enforcement by muddying the waters for their neighbors.

It was something she could maybe see her group getting into to keep out of the really nasty stuff that entire silent wars were fought over between big enough factions, but she was opting more as a strong-hold dead zone utilized as a safe neutral meeting location even if that would take her more effort to establish.

Tyr would eventually cause that himself, when the very first assassin he kept decided to retire as best they could. Either the resort village she lived in or the slightly bigger midway town he lived next to would end up a Varia retirement location, more than likely his if he didn't put some effort in cultivating her locals to tolerate the southern Italians and criminal types more than they would naturally.
She wasn't particularly enjoying the backwards and dim glimpse of the work of a disposed French crime boss, and the tangents her mind then wandered down because the paperwork was that fucking boring… but someone needed to do it. There were tiny mentions she might be able to use in the near future, political shit she really rather forget about but couldn't because it might just be useful, and there was still the concern of just who told these assholes Verde was nearby.

Sonya read through dictionaries and thesauruses to improve her grasp on other languages, she was well-used to dry and boring. It didn't mean she enjoyed such occasions, but she could do it.

The thing of importance was that Monsieur Paul had been in power for a few decades. Not a generational syndicate, either at the cusp of changing hands the very first time like the Zolotovs nor an established bloodline-inheritance thing like Vongola. He had started his gang of like-minded assholes and kept in power for at least a decade or two, without putting effort towards finding himself a replacement just yet so he was still trying to add the last two or three pieces to his territory rather than building up his base or tufting out rivals.

His only flaw was either impatience or too hasty opportunistic greed… and a lack of appreciable information on just what he was trying to go after before anyone else realized just who was in his city.

He had information coming in, in fact the thief was now looking at the report that must have informed Monsieur Paul that Verde was puttering around in his backyard. Not by name or anything, but 'a high chance of that weapons maker with strong Russian influences' was thought to be attending the CECAM conference on possible future nuclear disarmament. The report wasn't indicative of any awareness of her presence, and there was a mention of a Mafia Land agent seen in the suspected man's company…

Nothing about a Storm, or her arrival. Likely three days old, then. It couldn't be four, as Verde hadn't been in France four days ago. No name either, so that informant would live to see another day… if the Vindice hadn't caught up to them by now.

CECAM likely had a mole, or seven. Or thirteen. Then again, it was a civilian group, so of course it was riddled with spies with various allegiances. Not all would mind serving two masters, so there was that as well.

Sonya didn't greatly care about any of it now she had struck out, because now everyone who was anything important would know full well she had the power and leverage to keep what she claimed as hers. And Verde was hers, by his own choice.

…not forever, or at least not entirely.

The man, given his scholastic records, would get bored of her easily in the next year or three. She really didn't have much interest in the sciences these days, nor did she have a need to figure out the gemstone-study further since she grew out of needing a rock to help her control. What there was of the study would be more than enough to solve any control/identification issues in the future, so she had no idea where to take it now.

Verde would eat through what she had, regurgitate it back into a more refined and comprehensive form likely better than Peter could do with just a higher education than the criminals he lived with now, and take it all on to the logical conclusions without her needing to put more effort or money into the subject… then probably wander off into his own projects. Point of that being, she didn't need to do anything for it to develop more into something usable so worrying about it would be a complete waste of her time and effort… and she'd probably get in the way.
Sonya would probably sell the gem-matching services in a likely *hellishly expensive boutique* in Mafia Land's commercial district, once there was something refined and ready to sell. That would also allow Verde an enforced-safety vendor for anything he might want to sell in the future, Peter to set up in a way he could both support himself and hopefully rediscover his independence since he wouldn't do it himself, and she'd still see a cut of whatever the twosome's brilliant minds dreamed up.

There was Miss brass ones, her favorite waitress, perhaps she wouldn't mind a bit of a better job than bussing tables.

Not only would selling the gem-matching service to an international audience undercut the Zolotov's at an embarrassing scale, and hammer home her whole displeasure with Gideon's pure bullshit running her out of her 'hometown', but it would also slightly impact *Vongola's own sphere of influence* a tiny bit. Neither of whom she had fond feelings for, so she felt perfectly entitled to make use of her previous work to suit her own needs. Like keeping on top of her money issues.

Her Lackey would be ever so pleased, reliable and steady income to manage instead of her rare flights of fancy heists and regular Mafia Land work.

The important part of that piece of future-possibilities was that Verde would, and indeed she expected, him to wander off on her at least physically if not entirely reputation-wise. She didn't have enough for him and didn't intend to force his compliance to her orders anyways if she had nothing for him to focus upon.

He'd be leaving her in time… but no one said splitting off from a syndicate or underworld power had to be a bitter, grudge-inducing affair. She'd much rather ensure Verde kept a high opinion of her and would not mind doing her small, sometimes semi-frivolous favors in the future than holding onto him until they both hated the other's guts. Like making her more armor, or better types as he refined things further because he was likely the type to never stop inventing new ways to apply information to get more.

Her way of doing the inevitable was just… more expedient. And less fraught with drama.

If Verde, Gilles, wanted out… he could get out of the lifestyle. He was easily smarter than her and given enough resources of a not-entirely-legal type the man could likely put together way too many plans to disappear and reappear as someone completely different halfway across the world if need be.

Sonya had been at the same point he was at now herself, and while she stayed a thief for her brother and foster family… Verde likely only stayed because he had Adrik and was comfortable enough in her grips to lack a need to ponder how to secure his freedom. He didn't have family entrenched in the lifestyle, only one real 'friend' in the lifestyle, and she suspected half the reason he was so 'biddable' for a Lightning of his nature was due to *always* wandering off mid-topic once he exhausted any and all new findings then being either intentionally or otherwise redirected into a new direction by others.

She had a new direction and more information for him, he followed. Exactly how Adrik got the man to pay him attention and why there was a fully functioning internet prototype sitting in the long hall of her castle's main floor back rooms, by being nearby when Gilles lost interest in his old subject of study with new information for him to devour.

Sonya likely had a prime opportunity to subtly direct Verde into a new subject next, once his interests in the basics of Dying Will Flames died a natural death in his attention span due to the lack of new information coming in needing sorting/comprehension. She wasn't entirely sure what she wanted more, better armor or a new style of Cloud-weapons, but it was *possible* she might get both if she could just phrase it all right.
…or she could do the likely responsible thing and redirect him into the medical field in truth. He probably wouldn't make for a very good doctor beyond the already documented injuries and illnesses to pull information from to apply in other situations, but that didn't mean having his big brain pre-stuffed with medical information before he might need it again was a lost cause.

She might need it in the future, Skull might. Fuck, even Renato might, Shamal, or any number of other idiot dependents she had gotten stuck with. Might as well, although Tatiana could be relied upon to do an annual checkup far into the future having at least one with more than a passing familiarity with medical concerns always nearby was the next best thing to a live-in nurse.

Letting the paperwork not her own fall through her fingers to rest on the bedspread because her hands were occupied covering a jaw-splitting yawn, she had picked out the important parts and the rest had little usable information for her right now, Sonya wondered which was she more? Greedy or prudent?

…prudent. Mainly because she was very lazy at heart and didn't want to go through that drama if she could skip it via preparing. Then she was greedy as hell, once she wouldn't hurt anything.

Stretching out across the hotel bed again, ignoring the paperwork not her own tipping off the bedspread to fall across the floor, the thief sighed heavily as Alek readjusted to keep himself plastered against her back and ass. Because the dog had gotten royally confused due to Anna adopting her appearance for alibi reasons, meaning he was being clingy and very suspicious so he didn't want pets just cuddles.

Cuddles where he could control things, so against her back it was.

What to do with Shamal when the brat visited next?

With both Usov and Anna being here, she highly suspected her brat was waiting on pins and needles for his turn. Likely the moment Usov was finished with his father and Afanasii, and the entire syndicate's worth of furniture they'd be 'liberating' from Verde's kidnappers. Hopefully between the three of them there was enough power to get the brat home again at the end of the night, he had school tomorrow.

In the middle of her plotting, Verde booted open the door with an absolutely thunderous expression. Arms stiff at his side, slamming the door almost on Hawk's nose, and immediately inspecting every inch of her mostly barred legs as he stormed forward away from the little square footage of 'entryway' their hotel suite possessed.

…right. He might be a bit sore with her for running him off right after his kidnapping attempt. Closure and all that. Which might not have been helped by letting him stew in his own frustrated ignorance for a couple hours with a likely utterly unhelpful Anna. "We probably won't see what's his face."

"…noted." Dismissed the Lightning tonelessly after the split-second he gave to acknowledge that statement, spindly fingers hesitating a centimeter over her right hip, and the oblong bruise-ring that indicated her version of her brother's Voodoo hiding a glancing-skim of a gunshot there. "I only observed one new injury this morning… how many?"

"Don't worry about it."

The look he shot her informed her that he found that entirely too inadequate of an answer.

Sonya merely arched an eyebrow back, because that was the answer he was getting.
"You claimed the same about the 'possibility of stains', may I remind you." Verde rather stiffly reminded her, drawing back and folding his hands behind his back as he just glowered his general displeasure. "Regardless, I can observe for myself exactly how many injuries you have sustained. Did the armor shatter?"

"It's glass, Gilles." The 'leg' armor clipped onto her garter belts, and some days it was just not worth the effort to attach the spindly-fiddly thing for the dubious protection of glass so there was a chance she'd skip it if she was in enough of a rush. "I didn't put them on anyways. I was a little too busy to untangle and put them on."

"With what, exactly?" Archly countered the Lightning, narrowing his bottle-green eyes just to ensure she felt his judgmental irritating as keenly as possible.

Oh, right. "I'm sorry for hitting you. This morning. I... shouldn't have done... that."

Verde didn't gape, so much as his facial features went slack for a moment.

Weirdly nettled by that surprise, Sonya shifted to sit upright even if her dog grumbled at her moving about. "Yes, I can admit it. I should not have hit you, so I apologize."

"I... there was no ill-effects suffered, such means an apology is not necessary-"

"You're not supposed to hit someone you're in a relationship with, so shut up and accept." Sonya snapped, now even more irked at his attempt to refuse when she knew full well she owed him more than just the words. "It was not okay. Even if you can tank a hit like that without getting your eggs scrambled."

Verde… kept looking at her strangely.

Even more irked, beyond her own understanding but she did really hate people being surprised that she had feelings so maybe that was it, she grabbed one of the sad floppy pillows provided to throw at his face. Unfortunately she pulled too much strength back, making the stuffed fabric rectangle flop even more pathetically off his face to the floor without so much as making the man step backwards from the assault.

He glanced down, back up at her, then snorted slightly as he adjusted his glasses and Alek energetically leapt off to 'fetch' the pillow for her. "As you insist, then. A query, what does 'tank' mean in a verb form?"

"...did you never run across D and D in college?" Distracted by that thought in the middle of accepting the rectangle of fabric from her dog, Sonya assumed he had been a bit more of a hermit than she had thought. Adrik or not, apparently the man was that anti-social that even the original role-playing game nerds hadn't gotten him corralled as a dungeon master. "Tank, as I used it, means to absorb or endure a frankly lethal amount of damage while surviving well enough to remain useful. A 'tank's' role, in Dungeon and Dragons or any other role-playing game, is to attract hostile attention and survive it while more 'squishy' characters throw their own attacks over the tank's shoulders. The mages and rogues and the like."

"I've never heard of it." Verde claimed with enough confusion to be audible in his tone, which gave her a pang of alarm as she fruitlessly strove to recall just when D&D came to be.

"Um... it was called something else before." Tried the thief hastily, hoping it was true as she scrapped up what little she remembered about the original pen and paper RPG's origins. "Something simple, but D and D is just... concise. Maybe it just hadn't reached the west coast of the US yet..."
"...do you mean to imply you studied on the Eastern Seaboard?" Then questioned the entirely too fucking smart man, causing her to snap her mouth shut.

Technically, she had. A lifetime ago.

"...distance learning. But kind of. I didn't finish, obviously." Alek decided to look at her expectantly, so he was safe to ignore for a short while while she got this conversation off the current topic before Verde caught on to something she couldn't lie her way through. "Was there anything else?"

He very obviously glanced to her barred legs, lingering maybe half a second on each new bruise she had since earlier this same morning and very obviously counting each one, down to the papers all over the floor her dog was carelessly standing upon as he waited the start of their game of fetch, then gave her a very pointed if silent stare down for two bewildering moments. "What. Happened? Not just with Lanthier, I can understand either you deemed him unreliable as I was not in the beginning or just not a risk you wish to expose your bare framework of a group that includes children to. There was a presence, a significant one, to take possession of myself against my will. How, in the bare three hours since you had Hawk take me back here, have you finished with all efforts to the point of deeming it secure enough to rest?"

Even more irritatingly, the man looked to be bracing himself for some really bad news.

Sonya couldn't decide if she felt more irked over the implied assumption that she just murdered everything off or didn't bother securing things without him at hand so there would still be a threat to him out there. Either way, she was annoyed. "I called in the Vindice."

There was a slow blink, and a lessening of stiffened shoulders for something bewildered. "...that is possible?"

"Obviously, or I wouldn't be here reading the asshole boss' paperwork. I'd be out with Usov still, trying to hunt down every...fucking motherfucker who even remotely should've known better." She earned a blank look for that, which frankly she was getting tired of. He should've known by now she wasn't that kind of criminal asshole, on general principles alone if not through her own fucking sister and her ex-minions. "Look, the Vindice put down certain laws we have to obey or risk... whatever happens. Obviously, going around the laws and trying to pick a fight out of your weight class isn't something they like. I have, technically because one I thought would count didn't so I had to use my brother and his idiot, eleven Dying Will Flame users. The idiot that tried to liberate you from me had none. There's a factor of 'allowed forces' the Vindice keep us to, a 'Law of Factors'. If you have no or under three Flame users, you can't fuck with anyone of ten or more. If you have more than ten, you can't fuck with someone that doesn't have any using your full force. I couldn't retaliate for you 'legally', not on short notice. It'd be seen as picking on someone that can't fight back, so I had to make use of another way. Hence, since you're French and I'm Russian and it was about the 'exchange of Flame-related information between two or more groups', I called in the Vindice overseer to make a judgement."

Verde needed to take a moment to absorb all that, which was fine because she felt kind of just tired overall now. "Then what happened to Lanthier?"

"I asked his punishment be deferred to you, you can even check with Usov that I did. But the Officer wasn't one for talking and it took the ass just like it took your want-to-be kidnappers." A controlled fall had her back to laying down on the bed, and as much as it annoyed Alek she made use of the pillow to cushion her head instead of toss for him to fetch again. "Anything else?"

Alek was glaring at her now, matching glares with him to let the animal know she was too tired to play with him distracted her a tiny bit.
"I apologize for doubting you." It was Verde's turn to appear annoyed at her surprise, and the fact he took the pangs to avoid 'looking down his nose' at her when she was currently waist height to him. "I held little hope of a positive result, in truth, but as he was entirely unaffiliated from them... I had the thought to try mitigating his involvement the best I might be able to. Adrik did so for I, and although I eventually sought my place with you... Lanthier had little to no option of the same himself."

"Like I told you, he was fucked from the start." Managed Sonya after a moment to sort out that implication-heavy confession for motives and reasonings. "There are ways to get into the lifestyle that are just complete non-starters... and he got one. He did participate, unwillingly or not, due to a drugging and a bit of gambling with the wrong people but he picked to disadvantage you instead of admitting he fucked up. I'm not going to waste any regret for him, he had poor life choices before those assholes took advantage, and I'd advise you to not waste any yourself. But you are you, not me, so you may do whatever you wish and I'll just content myself with ensuring you can do so by choice."

He thought about it, which while that pause between her words and her various minions' deciding what to do from there was a tiny bit annoying still she could accept they were all way too new to one another for unthinking trust and she didn't want that anyways, before deciding to seat himself on the edge of the bed with his back mostly to her. Just simply to work all the details through his big brain for a little while, apparently.

Sonya left him to it, settling in for the nap that had been interrupted with not only the paperwork now making up the floor beneath Alek's paws but his own abrupt arrival.

For some reason, she was exhausted.

Probably due to Voodoo reasons, because she was as in pain as she was tired, but it still didn't make her feel better about the Flame-born tiredness she only distantly recalled feeling once before in her current lifetime. It wasn't like she really did much this morning but be shot at, but realizing she was nearing the edge of what she could realistically do was a little alarming. Hopefully when she woke up she'd be less tired, or she'd have to visit a hospital a lot sooner than she had counted on.

"...the moment Usov's done with his job, it's likely Shamal will be up here to visit. We're probably going to have dinner with him, so plan accordingly."

Verde's response was an absent, but not displeased, grumble before she decided enough was enough and she really needed that nap now.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

Curiously, it took more than just Shamal shaking her by the shoulder for Sonya to wake. Alek licked her face too, and the combination finally got the thief to stir when she hadn't for the Lightning relocating to allow her to rest fully without him looming over her form or the child's admittedly less showy than expected arrival.

Verde, now tucked in a corner of their hotel suit with a half-filled notebook filled with his handwriting on several projects and proposals to adjust several more currently on-going ones with Scruffy, scowled.

At first, with only two of those 'Voodoo' marks, she woke when he tried to slide out of bed without waking her and could go about her day without much apparent issue. Now with five additional
Voodoo marks even a nap was deep enough her godson had to expend actual effort to gain her awareness, and she still seemed tired and exhausted as she adjusted herself to include the child on the bed.

He was unsure just how much effort 'Cloud Voodoo' required, lacked any relatable estimation on how much Cloud Flames it took to replicate a square inch of living flesh, and furthermore had no idea how to equate how 'strong' a user of Dying Will Flames were in their respective aspects.

…to make everything even more oblique, he was unsure if the highway chase to keep up with him was unusual or not for what energy expenditures she could sustain before it affected her beyond the restorative qualities of a short rest.

In short, he found himself lacking the requisite information to understand the severity of the situation and did not appreciate it in the least.

However, the only one to blame was himself.

Allowing himself to be distracted by alternatives and other information tangentially related resulted in a scattered focus of study, meaning while he had the rough understanding of a variety of subjects related to Dying Will Flames he had no depth to it for any other type than Lightning.

…additionally, given what critical pieces of information he had learned within twenty-four hours under his boss' eye, he couldn't even claim to know his own type adequately enough.

Verde glanced down at his notebook and wrote in a suitably encrypted notation to remind himself to set aside three hours to inquire with Galina of any other 'common sense' facts she might not have thought to inform him of. Preferably without coming off as accusing her of something, for while he respected the woman the fact remained her job was more to keep everything moving in one direction as Sonya wished than tend to any new Flame users and their health. Especially fully-grown ones, she tended Peter's decade's worth of combat fatigue as it was and he did not wish to impose on either while the man was recovering himself.

Adrik would require three beers, perhaps four if he took it that badly, to accept Verde did not fault him for being unaware of the caloric-issue Flame users apparently had until forced into close quarters with a fully informed Storm-Cloud able to see the issue clearly given the opportunity. Perhaps there was a way to get his best friend to inquire of the other Lightning for him, and that held the possibility to not destroy the amicable tolerance between him and the senior Lightning that underlined their interactions so far.

"Kotenok, I might need your help."

"Anything." Shamal quietly promised his godmother instantly, not remotely caring that he was in the room to hear or see him shamelessly snuggling into her hug as the woman had not sat up yet.

"...you're not supposed to do that... I didn't even say what I needed."

The child made a rude and disgusting noise, wiggling only enough to tuck his brunette head under her chin. "If it was Mister Renato, or Ceaser, or even Mister Adrik... then yeah I would've waited to see what first. I'm not stupid, mamma."

"How does instantly promising me whatever I want not come off as being stupid?"

"Because. It's like... how you taught me to pickpocket. You'll give me the information, let me apply it with your skills first, then ensured I have the physical skills to match the information, and only then let me pick pockets. Against civilians only. Mister Renato would ensure I knew everything I
might need, not entirely realize it but I would at least know the answer, but he'd throw me straight in to gain the experience the hard way. I know you're only going to ask what I can do, you're really precise like that. Besides, I only have anything because of you. If you want something, it's the least I can do in return."

Sonya tilted her head backwards just far enough to see Verde clearly, her expression speaking volumes to her complete confusion. He would be of no assistance as he didn't understand the young Mist's thought process even with an explanation either.

Shamal apparently realized he had lost them both and blew a raspberry against his godmother's neck to regain her attention. "Mamma, the only reason I have anything right now is because of you. If you need something, from me specifically rather than anyone else, of course I'll help."

"...so long as nobody else can understand you and anticipate what you'd be willing to do or not, fine. Whatever." Curling back up around her godson, the thief dropped her tone to only carry far enough to her child and no further. *After* wiping off her neck and smearing the mess onto her very pleased canine's fur.

Verde did not remotely mind being excluded while in the same room, and he returned his attention to the to-do list/list of hypotheses he intended to explore as soon as practical.

The only limitation he could see was the fact she had collected a very random collection of Flame users, and only a limited number of them. Hawk was a Storm, Peter a Sun, three different Mists, two child-aged Rains, himself and Galina for Lightnings, and then only herself for Cloud.

No Sky. Leaving out a critical center piece of the array, limited options for one of the remaining six, and five children Verde did not feel right involving in his studies which would rule out another two significant fractions of the spectrum.

…at least, Sonya had not collected them *yet.*

He could set aside three parts for later when possible targets arrived, the remaining four had likely more than enough details waiting to be discovered to tide him over for a measure of time. Enough patience and he might just gain the unknowing or deliberate assistance of her 'associates', Fong from the Triads and Mingxia's brother was just one that he had met recently who seemed adequately informed in his Flames.

It would require him to socialize outside of his personal labs, but if he at least had a topic to speak upon hopefully he would not exasperate or frustrate whomever he was speaking with or ignoring him. He had managed a conversation with Fong about old Chinese folk-stories of Dying Will Flames somewhat successfully using Sonya's stored stock of French ones to give back, even if it had been eventually interrupted by Master Yaozu and young Mingxia the Storm had been mainly visiting.

"Gilles, are you going to hang around all day?"

"That was my intent, yes."

Having finished her quiet word with her godson, the thief stretched out and rolled onto her front to lift her head and look straight at him… around the banner of a tail her canine companion possessed as he beat it in apparently happiness. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Seafood?" There might be an older place he recalled his parents frequenting in his childhood, although locating it would require a glance through a phonebook to see if it was still open. At worse, he would just find a suitable alternative if he refrained from describing what little he really recalled of
the restaurant. "Or I may find you an alternative, if you wish for a specific ethnic style."

It was interesting that, considering the amount of effort she had brought forth to safeguard his attendance, she had not commented on his 'playing hooky' on CECAM's structured workshops for the invited scientific gathering.

"Seafood is fine... say in an hour? Two?"

"...theoretically suitable, I shall endeavor to alert you if there needs to be a change of itinerary."

"Anna's still downstairs if you need something. I need to hit up a museum nearby that claimed to be able to finish, or rather verify, the translation work I did on that scroll. Not that I got all that far into it." Her movements were not significantly impacted, she moved as fluidly as normally and even watching closely he could not tell one movement from a flinch or hesitation if she was still in pain. "Want to come with me, brat?"

...perhaps he should look into a method to manufacture painkillers on demand. Not to offer all that often, but then again the thieves around him had gone to considerable and painful lengths for him and Verde was not a useless nor ungrateful man.

"If you're going into town, yeah. Marco's gotten into the habit of eating my socks."

"...why did you want a dog, again?"

Shamal shot his godmother a smirk as he prepared to jump off the bedspread. "Why? Would you give up Alek-"

"No." Denied the young woman shortly, ignoring the animal completely as Alek fetched his own leash and waited for the humans to assemble themselves to leave the room by the door just to ensure the boy knew she didn't remotely appreciate his flippancy.

"Exactly. Everyone wants a dog, mamma." His advent from the furniture was significantly less smooth in movement than his guardian's, almost tripping over air itself before he improbably righted himself before hitting the floor. "Besides... I've got a school science fair to think up a project for. Might as well see what's on the shelves around here."

"...and just why," Verde inquired tonelessly from his corner and attracting the mother-son pair's attentions, acknowledging but pushing aside the pang of offended pride, "am I not your first option to inquire of?"

"I don't know how to break this to you, Verde... but you're cheating. Not even the fun kind of cheating either." With an entirely to bratty smirk, and a poor attempt to elevate his nose at him when even sitting the Lightning was still significantly longer in form, the young Mist sniffed haughtily. "Besides, we all agreed Mingxia got to ask you for help. She would need the entire lecture and then some you'd cram into her head on whatever she picked."

He gave the child a flat stare. "I am more than capable of monitoring and following multiple projects in any stages of progression, I assure you. Your excuse is inadequate."

"Great! Then we'll be by your place about as soon as you get back to have you check over and help us sort out our projects. Thanks Verde!" Hastily gripping the dog's leash, without clipping the length of leather to the animal's collar first, the Mist made a hasty exit theoretically 'before' the Lightning could deny the assumed permission.

Sonya hesitated, having slowly selected a pair of pants from her luggage and only just a set of socks...
to go with. "You could've said no."

"I could have, yes." Shamal was not faster than his ability to understand and furthermore before he even spoke the first syllable, he had been at least tangentially aware of how his words could be 'twisted' in a mischievous child's mind to gain him an advantage.

She arched an equally as carefully dyed brown eyebrow at him in apparent confusion as she pulled on the only article of clothing that would not be awkward to observe for him. "Then why didn't you?"

"I do not mind presiding over the children's initial bids for scientific research, and likely such permission coming with the implied implication of assisting myself and Peter with the safer lab work awaiting has not occurred to him just yet."

"So you didn't say no just for free child-labor. I think I might've protested... if you hadn't mentioned 'safer'."

Verde honestly thought about the situation more, than just what he would require trumping the child's bid to twist him into thoughtlessly assisting his aims required. "Likely, if what we are working on is too hazardous, I may in fact set them to chores about the house I tend to... overlook. Frequently."

"Mingxia's going to jump all over that, the moment she understands you're willing to help her." Sonya continued to eye him speculatively, rather than leave to dress and corral her child and pet from running amok. "Can I recruit you, then?"

"...I beg your pardon?"

"Shamal's going to go for the first, semi-over his apparent education level but not entirely the edge of what he knows, project he can think of. It's how he's been keeping up with both his schoolwork and his godfather's expectations last year. We were aware of this, and the first year of schooling isn't really the 'most important' one aside establishing the habit of school-life." She explained simply, glancing momentarily over his shoulder and into the streets their hotel window overlooked when mentioning her deceased fellow godparent. "Now he's familiar with the routine, and we were going to speak to him about it..."

That was not an idea he had thought of himself, in full honesty. The only time his parents would attend a competition of his, if his tutors had entered him or he had done so himself, was if he reached the top three finalists and there would be enough of a break for them to hear and travel whatever distance involved. Therefore proving his knowledge base and understanding of the concepts to any average onlooker had been his goal in every fair or competition, rather than picking concepts at or close to what others assumed him to be at.

Not that he had more than a passing knowledge of what 'education level' others his age was at when he was that young. Aside the fact he was supposedly more advanced than public or privately offered schooling.

"Isn't deception a skill you wish him educated with?"

"Yes, but so is deceiving an expert or disbelieving adult to their face about their own expertise or about subjects they might not entirely know." The thief folded her pants over an arm, giving him one last sideways look before walking to the tiny washroom. "If you fail or not I'm not particularly bothered, he's got years yet to work on his deceiving skills within a safe space like a civilian-run school. However, when it comes to something he feels is worth the effort... like confounding you into
helping Mingxia without a second thought in order to 'trap him' into a situation of his own making. I'd rather he put in actual effort into it. If you could. It's kind of annoying when in a parent-teacher conference I have to field 'he's too creative' accusations."

"I'll... what?" She didn't answer, and Verde hastily reviewed everything both he and the child had said between the first mention of a primary school science fair and Shamal's hasty exit.

...he had, without question, accepted the implication of the young Rain Mingxia's priority in Shamal's statement in his haste to ensure the young Mist couldn't entrap him without repercussions. Likely the child intended to hold him to that promise made from omission, Adrik was that petty as well and he was at least aware of what Russians did when they felt one half of the terms agreed upon were not held up.

Shamal had used himself like bait, and Verde had not questioned the too easy 'trap' the Mist wound around himself. Even if, from some months of co-habitation alone if not the very nature of his guardians, he should've been aware the child was a tricky one.

Snorting softly, he unfolded his long frame from the chair in order to find the phonebook he had noted under one of the bedside tables. At the very least, he had one if not more phone calls to make and a reservation to put in place before his next confrontation with a young Mist intent on keeping his advantages even if he didn't greatly mind.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 18th of October, 1970 continued. La Cour des Consuls, Toulouse, French Republic.)

"Are you at least going to-"

"Nope." Besides, Miss Bazanova released him from any contractual obligations by leaving his signed Mafia Land contract out and in Hawk's back pocket. Almost expressed, engraved permission to leave already.

…Garrett McCarthy survived. It was probably the most incongruous part of the entire situation, there was no massive fuckup that needed a disposable body to be thrown at nor any large dustup where an extra set of hands could help anything. There was one semi-risky situation McCarthy hadn't even been around for, but his temporary student was won him that bonus he was promised.

No catches, no loopholes. Technically his 'protégé' had only been peripherally involved in recovering the stick of an egg-head, but before he could even muster up any talking points to try arguing it anyways he got the reward without a fight.

Hence, he wasn't going to leave so easily. *Something* had to be going on, it just didn't make sense any other way he tried to figure it all out.

Hawk gave a long-suffering sigh, grabbing the leather coat suitably altered to contain the various tools Garrett instructed him in that they modified three weeks ago. "*Then are you joining us for dinner? Verde said it was seafood.*"

"...*nope.*" Free food was free, the conference had a buffet for the staff and hangers-on that accompanied their selected scientists but wouldn't leave them unattended to feed themselves. Mafia Land had an *abundance* of seafood, he could eat it every night for the next week without making a cringe-worthy dent in his savings, not so much vegetables or red meats.
There was a pause, and the Storm suddenly leaned over his shoulder with a decent crack at an expressionless face. "Do I need to be concerned with why you're not budging just yet?"

Barking a laugh, the middle-aged Mafia Land agent leaned back and kicked his feet up on the younger man's bed in their hotel room. "I'm staying so I don't have to pay for a night on the island, brat. This room is covered until nine tomorrow, you bet your ass I'm taking full advantage to sleep somewhere for free."

The payout and bonus for this contract would last him at least half a year or more, that would start the moment he returned to the island. Most of his semi-annual or bi-annual bills, for suitable clothing and restocking his toiletry kit, had long since been paid for while training the younger scut and would save him maybe another month or two of rent money. Another day spent here meant one more day's grace there and while he still suspected there was something going on… they were running out of time to catch him in it.

Whatever it might be.

"So… just because you're cheap? I'm not stupid enough to buy that."

Good. "Don't let your panties get into a twist, kid. I don't intend to leave the room and I don't intend to leave until the very minute I have to. But… that doesn't mean I'm going to let anyone anticipate where or when I'm going to go."

"For all we know, I might actually be older than you." Pointed out his utterly unamused 'student' flatly, ignoring the second and more sarcastic bark of laughter at his expense. "Am I going to have to worry you're going to try ambushing me on our way back tonight, or not?"

"You never know." It would make the young bull paranoid and on top of his game, and he didn't have to lift a finger. Efficiency in three words, his favorite kind.

Besides, he wanted a word with 'the boss'.

Eventually.

Probably on Mafia Land, in a suitably busy location that wasn't private.

Maybe after he got his money from the woman's Lackey and safety squirreled away somewhere heavily ensured against thieves.

…and had the time to sell of the information he'd gathered being here at all to the people that would want it for a tidy nest egg.

All that and maybe one or two precautions more, but he wanted the word with the girl before his imagination ran away with him and he started to believe this was entirely as it looked from the outside.

It couldn't be. No one honestly hired Mafia Land grunts for exactly what they said they needed.

(Monday the 19th of October, 1970. Student Dorms, University of Zürich, Zürich, Swiss Confederation.)

There was a limitation on Leon the Chameleon's ability to shapeshift, a creature made of already mind-bending Mist Flames or not. An analogue wristwatch caused the tiny lizard fits of paralogisms around his wrist as it tried to figure out how to make one at his request.
Likely due to all those tightly interlaced moving parts, as Leon had no issues mimicking everything from a pen to an umbrella so far. While the trigger mechanisms in a handheld pistol were things he knew intimately as well as his own hands and were equally as tightly crafted to minimize wasted space, clockwork was on an indefinitely more refined and complex scale altogether. It was entirely possible Leon's ability to mimic everyday objects relied on either his or the creature's understanding of the concepts involved, or if Leon had encountered something before in his admittedly brief life.

Perhaps the chameleon could be taught, once it was older… or perhaps that was an outer limitation of the creature's innate gift of shapeshifting.

Covering his still young pet with one hand, half to stop watching the lizard attempt to bend itself into a continually moving shape because it was giving him a headache and half to let his chameleon know it was alright to stop trying, he glanced up and down the hallway to the wall-mounted clock merrily ticking away instead.

Exactly six thirty in the morning, one Italian Mafioso going by the handle of 'Ranier Scarano' for a time knocked sharply on a specific dorm door more than two floors and some distance of a hallway away from his own assigned accommodation.

A muffled thump, someone feminine and very unhappy groaning a tired dismissal, some crashing of papery stacks and less than graceful stumbles, then the curvy brunette who answered the door by sharply yanking it open with the intent to start screeching was distracted by a cup of black coffee he quickly produce from the carton of three set to balance on an open windowsill.

It was dreadfully acrid and a poor substitute for the finely refined espressos the Italian was used to back home… but it was life-giving caffeine in concentration. Bonus, it distracted the half-dressed senior upperclassman from expressing any displeasure to be needy and appreciative instead.

"Your morning wakeup call, lovely." He ever so helpfully reminded her, to nip any lingering annoyance or irritation under the recollection that they had asked him to do this. "Someone not yet up needs to be on time for a lab practical in half an hour, and I believe you informed me you might've promised your mornings this week to a certain professor…"

The shapely brunette wearing only a red tee shirt and a pair of pink and purple tie-dye panties hummed, drugged to pliable compliance as she practically melted against her dorm's doorjamb with a cheap waxed paper cup cradled in her hands. "...and we paid for the dubious pleasure of your early morning visit the entire week, right. Beth, coffee. Scarano's-"

"Fuck!" The whipcord thin blonde still in bed bolted out of it without a second's thought, he could clearly see that only one of the provided dorm beds had been used vigorously last night and apparently both women had been sharing the same one, wearing even less than her shapely bedpartner. A bare and taught derrière wiggled back and forth as the owner searched frantically through a closet, earning a tired scoff from the woman that had answered the door.

"Cover your fanny, schatje. Either Scarano's gay or already committed because I've already tried getting him in bed and he's refused."

"Not that hard." Mused the man in question, shooting the now drowsy but awake senior watching him speculatively over the rim of her paper cup a quick smirk before stealing one last glance at the barred rear presented before it was covered up. "I have the policy to not hold any lady to their word if something's offered when they're drunk or under the influence… but if it's still on offer…?"

Mafia women tended to not hold to any agreements they might not have otherwise offered sober in the light of day the next morning, it was just sound policy as agreeable as he was for feminine
company when they were offering. Kept the really risky incidents down, he didn't lose part or all of his wardrobe to vindictive ladies, and there was the matter of being armed and willing to use it in closer than comfortable quarters when they weren't expecting any company…

An offer given by a well passed tipsy woman was unfortunately well into that category, but he had his own personal rules in place for years before she laid eyes on him and making excuses 'this once' was only a good recipe to keep making excuses until it killed him.

"Mmm… nope. Beth's of the opinion boys are 'icky', and while she'll go with it if drunk enough that ship has since sailed." Smugly denied the upperclassman with a wicked smirk.

"Alas… but then again, not the hottest threesome I've turned down in my life."

"Bull shit. Do you see this ass?" She demanded hotly, apparently how attractive her rear might be superseded her desire for coffee and any concern for privacy because it was immediately abandoned to her now dressed lover's possession… only for her to turn the other young woman around and gesture to the tolerant blonde's now denim covered rear. "Correction, do you see this ass?"

"Pair of Russian sisters, for an entire month-long vacation to France's nude beaches." Countered the gunslinger as a matter of fact, well aware the offer hadn't actually been an offer only Tatiana messing around with her sister and him by proxy but it still counted in his mind. "Ballerinas. The redhead had the perfect curves and a chest you could probably happily suffocate in, the blonde legs that went on forever."

"…damn, Sarah. I think we just got outclassed." Sarah De Vries scoffed and snatched at the last untouched coffee cup, but despite the scowl she seemed to reluctantly agree with her lover. Bergljoth 'Beth' Krehbiel gave a wistful sigh into the mostly empty cup. "I want a pair of Russian sisters to proposition me one day, ballerina skills optional."

It had been a uniquely life-altering situation, and a wakeup call that Sonya was a woman with all that entailed instead of a gangly twelve-year-old girl still. "Life goals."

"Amen, brother."

"I feel this entire conversation has gotten off track, here." Airily claimed the brunette, only a tiny bit sourly. "You're a boy, you're supposed to be a drooling mess of hormones at two inches of bared skin and the realization of what you're dealing with. Not one-up me on a passed opportunity to get shagged by a pair of lesbians by pulling out two willing foreign sisters."

"Correction, that's a man." Interjected the blonde simply. Utterly unbothered by the other woman's ire and while the glance to the clock mounted down the hallway a bit spoke of an awareness to meet a deadline, she also wasn't particularly bothered about taking her leave just yet. "He's older than us, Sarah. You won't be able to bend his rational thought process into knots like we can the new meat."

They were trying to haze him. A pair of college girls, trying to haze a blooded Mafioso.

Utterly adorable.

As far as attempts to screw with him went, this one was phenomenally gentle compared to what he was used to. Civilians, yes… but he could think of several 'civilian-worthy' alternatives that was more mentally scarring and distasteful than having two lovely lesbians trying to get a reaction out of him by brazenly flaunting themselves and each other.

Highly amused, the Sun using hitman claimed his real prize of the morning in the cup of imported if still somewhat sub-par coffee from a local shop open early enough to have it and saluted the two of
them with it. "I've suffered through worse than a pair of utterly gorgeous ladies inviting me to bed, however little you intend to see that through. Then there's the fact you paid me to watch a show, no self-respecting man would pass that up."

The brunette sniffed in insult, sulky and annoyed as she retreated into their dorm to dress herself. With the mostly full coffee cup to boot.

"The fact I have a budget for bribing boys when she breaks the alarm clock..." Beth smirked wryly up at him, coquettish and wicked all in the same breath even if she did have a very valid deadline to meet. "I'm glad it was you this time, her antics can get a bit tiring."

"...ho?"

"You're not going to fall for it, and it's going to stump her for at least a good few weeks if not a month or so. Angry sex, no missing class, and coffee delivered every morning for a week? I like."

With a pleased little hum to go along with her draining the dregs of the half-finished cup of coffee, Beth sauntered off with a very intriguing sway to her hips. "I'll be sure to put in those two good words you probably want in Professor Jenssen's ear, Scarano. Maybe he'll let you test out Introduction to Advanced Calculus at the end of the week."

…and that was his mission completed.

The whole reason he gave two seconds to the upperclassmen appealing for a personal wakeup call was the fact they were seniors. On their last years of study in a four and a five-year course of study each, biology and a business major. They had the time and history built up with the academic staff in specific departments to have their opinions give a little more weight on a subject, which he couldn't fake or make in the short amount of time he had set aside for his college attempt.

Lacking the time to create that kind of history himself, that left getting another to use their history on his behalf. Either willingly or not.

He was up before the sun anyways, they paid for the coffee and a little extra for him to keep as a tip, and perhaps he might be able to make Oppliger's self-imposed goal of a Mastery in Mathematics in a year or so happen.

Getting a lovely lady laid in the pursuit?

While he might not be the one pleasing her, the lady's choice was another lovely lady so he didn't remotely mind missing out this time. It wasn't like he could compete in that category, so the loss was easily accepted.

Sipping at the rapidly cooling coffee, subpar it might be however it was free and of a grade better he could get from the cafeteria, he wandered leisurely through the halls to return to his own dorm. It was early enough the only ones passing him were those like Beth who had projects or labs to complete and wished to beat their lazier classmates to them or those tiredly dragging themselves to bed for whatever sleep they could catch after cramming all night to prepare for classes this week.

Leon, not quite recovered from his attempt to mimic a condensed piece of clockwork, dove under the collar of his thin wool sweater to bask in the Sun's body heat. Tiny lizard claws dug into his skin and the chameleon inched a bit further down to rest squarely between his shoulder blades.

Refraining from twitching, possibly dislodging the creature or flinching for no reason in the face of all the other students in the halls, Scarano soundlessly opened his dorm's door.

His 'roommate' was still sleeping.
…how lovey.

Loitering only long enough to drain the rest of his coffee, the gunslinger delicately and equally as soundlessly padded his way further into the darkened room to place the waxed paper cup down on his spotlessly clean desk.

Then, he kicked the other desk with books and loose documents already thoughtlessly splayed out on the wooden surface. The dull wooded thud wasn't quite so satisfying, he would've preferred the sharper rattling bang a metal desk would've given but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The yelp the skinny, pimply faced youngster so unfortunately sharing space with the Italian Mafioso gave was at least acceptable when his books rained down on his unsuspecting head. If not quite what he had been going for in his second wake up call of the day.

"Get. Up." Ordered the older of the two darkly, even if the kid was 'senior' to a new freshman. "You have less than five minutes to get to your first class… if you run."

About to give something he likely thought would be scathing and suitably snarkly, not whiny and annoying as the Sun found his 'roommate' within two seconds of meeting the brat a handful of days ago, the kid's eyes caught on his alarm clock's face and the fact he apparently slept through the alarm he set the night before.

A second yelp was practically music to the Mafioso's ears, paired as it was with the sound of him tripping over his own books and faceplanting into the cold floor below.

Sliding his desk chair out, he sprawled out and idly watched the boy scramble about half-dressed and panicked. Leon didn't budge, the lizard didn't like his roommate any more than he did and wouldn't move no matter how closely the idiot pressed his nose closer in hopes of seeing the chameleon move.

He really needed to get his pet a houseplant or something to cling to and explore when he had to study for class… or borrow a trowel and a container from a gardener's shed and simply unearth a local plant.

Possibly he could get a very agreeable blonde biologist to do his dirty work in exchange for another day or two of personally delivered coffee she'd pay for, if she became aware of Leon's existence in the coming week.

His dormmate, a temporary one if he had anything to say about it, tripped over himself trying to both shimmy into a pair of bellbottom jeans and stomp on snake-skin boots without socks. Noisy, annoying brat didn't bother apologizing for his flailing about, he just pulled a random shirt from under his bed to pull on while leaning into the older man's side of the room for the space to work with.

The only reason he was bothering waking the kid at all was due to one of the professors, harried between Opplinger's badgering and the Mafioso's two steps shy of pointed irritation and everything else a teacher of Switzerland's largest colleges had to do at the start of a semester, half-assedly promising to let him try to test out of a future class if he could keep the brat on time this one.

Just for getting the upperclassman to finally graduate, as the only classes he had left were all scheduled for the morning.

He intended to hold the professor to their word, even if and especially if they didn't recall giving it. The amount of time it would save him alone to test out of Advanced Geometry Applications made the risk of annoying a member of the staff worth it. Not entirely the risk he was running of that
professor passing on an unflattering word to others of the academic staff, but he would have to
conquer that upset when there was one.

Scarano the supposed Italian freshman student slid three books from the neat stack of them on a low
bookshelf also provided to furnish the dorm rooms and set them on the desktop as his roommate
stumbled straight into the door with his bookbag half open and threatening to spill its contents all
over the floor and only one shoe on his foot. By the time the older man had picked out his notebooks
and folders for his morning classes the kid had bolted out the door, unaware the Mafioso had wound
his clock backwards an additional ten minutes and failing to check for any time-related discrepancies
with the clocks posted here or there down every hallway.

He really intended to keep the brat on time, any way it was possible.

Leon decided he would accompany the Sun to his classes today, curling up and ensuring his tiny
claw's were dug into the material of the sweater the Flame user was wearing instead of skin.

Unbothered by the care he would have to exert to ensure he didn't lose his pet somewhere between
class, he carefully assembled what he would need for the morning in a canvas side bag that reminded
him more of a briefcase than a backpack. His own classes wouldn't start for another hour and a half,
but there was no reason he couldn't get breakfast with the money left over from waking the two
ladies earlier.

Every tiny bit helped, one way or another.
"Are you certain you would not like accompaniment?"

"Would you rather sit in a waiting room or a museum exhibit for a couple hours until the 'expert' has a chance to finish the perfunctory inspection of the scroll, or attend the 'final session' thing for your last day of being a collected scientist? I assure you, at least one of those options is as boring as hell… and the other one you can at least socialize with other eggheads while you wait out an arbitrary time limit."

Verde, because of course the asshole could think faster than her so he had counter-arguments on the ready instantly before she could finish countering his first one, gave a grumpy grunt she was taking as dismissive of the comparison she offered while tossing a black leather belt he apparently deemed not suitable for today into his mostly packed luggage in favor for the brown braided affair. "Such 'expert' has had most of the morning so far to conduct any inspection… if such an 'expert' has not been able to rule out your item of contention from being genuine then the alternative should not be out of the question. I am more interested in the outcome of your distraction than I am re-covering the same topic for the third time among other scientists that have already decided their course of action and wish to utilize the last scheduled meeting to exchange less topic-centric news with one another."

"You used eight words when you could have used one. Gossip, informal news generally made of more guesswork than fact shared between two or more people. There is a word for the exact subject you're attempting to describe, use it."

The complete asshole picked up his wallet from the bedside table, selected a five-hundred-franc banknote to pull out of the billfold, and handed it to her while tucking the wad of folded leather into his back pocket. "No."

Sonya took it, because free money, but regardless pinned him with a dark look as she tucked it away under Alek's collar. While she respected him sticking to his habits and not letting her change his opinion just because she didn't like something about him, it was still fucking annoying to need to reference her internal thesaurus or a physical one later just to understand the man's whole point.

"...ah, additionally. You are wearing my last clean dress shirt." He gestured to his neatly packed luggage and the two less stack of shirts folded and tucked next to a stack of slacks he had on top, and the fact he was only wearing the thin undershirt he normally wore to keep his compromised body temperature up under his clothing.

"No, I bought you two more when I got Shamal socks last night. Besides, steal." She had gotten too used to using a men's dress shirt as nightwear and going back to bad habits to make herself comfortable would mean trying to not do it again this night would keep her up for another two or three hours more while trying to travel around the world.

Right now, with her legs technically not full of holes, she just wanted to be comfortable more than she wanted to avoid complicating the lives of those around her.

Verde was only temporarily distracted by the remains of her shopping her brat hadn't taken back with him and Anna last night, plucking one dress shirt that conformed to the color palate and design of those she had been stealing all weekend and one more to replace the one she bleed all over and Alek
Shamal picked out the second one, and light tan with the garishly bright purple and blue paisley printed cotton did seem a little 'not Verde'. She suspected the brat just liked that it was purple and blue, as close to their Flame colors as mass manufactured industry could get, more than he suspected it would fit the gangly Lightning’s whole… personage.

Sense of fashion?

Not like she had much of one to judge by… she let Shamal buy the monstrosity.

"I do not believe it is 'stealing' if you replace the item after taking one." He offered after a pause, then hefted the second wildly more colorful shirt in confusion. "Furthermore, why do you not simply utilize a new one instead of one I have owned for some time? This one is… appreciated, if not quite an item fitting to my taste in aesthetics."

"Because this one's nicely broken in, and not scratchy. That one probably is scratchy and stiff."

"…that would be one of if not a major factor someone may wish to contest your liberation of apparel."

"Yeah? Thief."

"Brazen of you to 'steal' such from me without bothering with deception or stealth."

"It's a mark of skill." She snorted at the highly disbelieving face he pulled at her for the quip, tossing one of Alek’s chew bones into his little doggy bag only for the furred brat to take it back out and pointedly gnaw on that one a few times just to let her know he wasn't done with that toy either. Like the six other toys piled up under his left paw he was trying to get away with by 'blocking' her view of them with his sheer fluffiness. "You didn't contest it when I put it on, way too late to complain now."

"What if I contest it now?" Verde poked back, also taking a step back so she could snag her little hygiene kit from the dresser where it ended up after he tried to use it to stop bleeding the previous morning instead of finish tucking an ill-used comb back into a side pocket.

Pausing with the fabric satchel in hand, Sonya reached up her free hand to the second button that held the material over her chest closed. "If you want it back so bad… well, I could take it off right now-"

"That is not necessary."

Amused, she watched him immediately hurry off to the ensuite bathroom to finish getting dressed with the very colorful dress shirt in hand he had been aiming a slightly disgusted look at before.

She fully understood that her 'partial nudity' occasionally made people react around her, she even knew why… occasionally. Why she couldn't do a few specific things and another might find it perfectly acceptable were sometimes murky subjects, factors that had either social or cultural reasons for she didn’t always know of at the time, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t get some kicks out of what little she was aware of.

She learned it from Renato, that night they broke into Alcatraz Island. It was funny, on the other side of the situation and not the one discomforted by unknown undertones. She hadn't wanted whatever tone that night had, because the hitman had found it entirely too amusing so she was aware she had almost smacked herself in the face with her own ignorance. Applying it to another situation informed
her on why the man did what he had, if not exactly for what reason aside the lewd one.

Besides, Verde had seen it all before. Yesterday, in fact.

Why he kept reacting like this to the mere suggestion of nudity was what she wanted to investigate, although she was semi-sure now he wouldn't want to talk about social nudity with her. Even if he had seen it all before and there could not be anything new to her being 'skimpily' dressed around him.

Eventually he had to stop reacting. Right?

Sonya slid a still bare foot backwards, stealing three of Alek’s toys out from under him while he tried to stealthily sneak just one more from his 'good boy' bag by stretching out his snout as far as he could to get a few fangs over another toy. The wounded innocent look he aimed up at her for doing it, once he realized it which took until she picked them up and tossed them back into the canvas carryall, simply made her smirk.

She was stealing all the things today. Because she said so.

Sonya was, strictly against the aching pain in both legs and the sore sandpaper-feeling in her chest, going to be cheerful today if it killed her. With her luck it probably would, but the attempt would be made because even she could only deal with deadpan snark and irritableness for so many days before she got on her own nerves.

Eight-fifteen, forty-five minutes before they had to vacate the hotel's rooms or pay for another day, Hawk politely knocked and tested the doorknob. Since she had walked the dog nice and early today to make up for the hour-long delay yesterday, it was open.

The Storm immediately backpaddled upon spotting her selecting her outfit for the day from her mostly assembled luggage, half-closing the door he had just opened and fixing his attention on the mildly curious Verde emerging from the tiny bathroom to clearly see the visitor. "Sorry, uh… McCarthy finally took off."

"Without a goodbye? How rude." Not that she really cared all that much, the Mafia Agent would likely talk to her after a few days in a more 'neutral' place like the island… probably.

Or he'd try to stalk her off the island for a less 'controlled' meeting, which she highly doubted. They both worked for the island after all, he knew full well what the consequences of working cross-purposes with another contracted agent carried. Especially without a contract to protect him for it.

"…so I'm going to stop interrupting, I'll wait for you two downstairs."

"Take the dog with you." The dog did not look at all that happy to be shooed out, probably correctly guessing she just wanted him out of the way to pack up all his things, but a grumpy and clingy pup was no match for her shoving him out and a leash clipped to his collar held by a Stormy bodyguard. "I just need to change, so we'll be down probably in time for checkout."

Verde eyed the man, Alek's utterly reluctant skid to the door, and the closed object behind the two instead of returning his attention to her. "I presume you would then like the bathroom to change?"

She could be really evil and chase him right back into the tiny side-room by actually stripping… but she merely kicked her pet's toys back into the bag without him taking them out again immediately and snatched her outfit for the day off the bed where she had laid it out to keep from packing it. "When you leave, grab the dog's bag too. He likes to carry it if we're moving."
Thankfully it hadn't taken the dog long to learn if he took something out of the bag while they were moving he was going to lose whatever toy he wanted to play with, and she would replace it eventually… but it would take a few days if not a week or so.

Despite bringing up the implication of moving himself, the Lightning didn't budge from the bathroom's doorway. "Before we move on to other aims, I have an inquiry. As unsure as I am on the topic, I would like to know… if… you have enjoyed yourself."

Uh… what?

Sonya stared at him blankly, admittedly a bit too long in the rules of social etiquette as applied to Lightnings in general, before finding a way to address that question. Hopefully equally before he deemed the conversational gambit as a failed one. "Well, yeah? It wasn't objectionable, and there was some entertainment to be had. Things got done, I had a good crack at professionally translating ancient Greek into something more modern, you've been seen perfectly fit and hale and whatnot. It'd be more fun if we didn't have to attend some scientific summit that excluded me based on some criteria we don't know, but this was where you needed to be so that wasn't actually a pain to work around."

He inspected her next, weirdly intently for something she had no remote idea about, before rocking back on his heels and absently smoothing down the new dress shirt with his left hand. "I see. Would you then be opposed to an, admittedly rare, future occurrence now or again?"

"…do you expect to need rescuing from kidnappers again so soon?" The moment the words left her lips she realized full well that was not what she should've said, although Sonya still had no remote idea what undercurrent this topic held and why the fuck it seemed so weighty suddenly. "I'd prefer something less intense, to be honest. I have enough holes. Can we do dinner sometime instead?"

Verde hunched up at her ill-spoken words as expected, somewhat displeased by how what she said applied to his question. It was almost like watching a clam slam their shell shut to undesired currents or something. "Preferable. Perhaps."

"Can we?" She asked, somewhat less flippantly than she intended and much to his obvious surprise… so she took the pangs to explain her opinion on the matter. "The number of people I can go get dinner or a drink with is somewhat… bare bones. My siblings, my dad… and while we drank tea or coffee Renato was usually good for a couple words between jobs with me… if you wouldn't mind I'd really appreciate the distraction. Even if you can only tear yourself away from your stuff once a blue moon."

Weirdly, he looked even more irked but now less defensive altogether.

If she could just add one more that would give her hugs… it'd maybe make up a little of what she had suddenly lost a couple weeks ago. The effort needed was kind of 'eh' though, and she really wouldn't want to do this whole 'careful' thing with another person again.

…not an adult, anyways. Adults should be fucking able to handle their shit, and who cared if they liked her at all?

Besides, she never got a 'normal' friendship in her life. This one, anyways. Why start now?

'Kidnapings' and friendship would probably exasperate her brother as much as 'stalking and friendship' had.

Bonus, maybe she now had a cuddle-buddy. He hadn't seemed to mind the touching in bed once he
got with the program. If, that was, she could figure out what the actual fuck was going on aside setting up a future engagement as actual friends this time instead of 'boss and minion pretending to be involved'.

"If you wish, I have little in the way of objections. Perhaps at least once a month?"

"Give or take, depending on my jobs. Um… starting next year, I'm running out of time this year for other things." It'd fit nicely into her plans on pacing out her heists from now on, so she didn't have to run around like a chicken with their head cut off trying to get everything finished on time in an end of year crunch. Random, spur of the moment, entirely subjective returns to the castle would just help Adrik keep a lid on things too before someone got a little too bold for her liking.

Verde hitched up a no-longer-tensed shoulder in easy acceptance of those restrictions before posing a few of his own. "And between my projects as well, perhaps we should aim once a quarter of a year-"

"No, I'm a bit more sociable than that. If the number of times I've hunted down Fong means anything… well, maybe not." She poked the front of her chest right over her second bullet hole of this entire farce, thinking back to how those few days went. "He kind of was directed at me first…and the second time I wasn't even looking for him. I really should've learned by now not to use that ass as an example of anything…"

"…perhaps then when possible?" He then countered, a funny little crease between two equally acidic green eyebrows but the man didn't sound annoyed or irked as Fong would be with the same tiny expression. Just… amused. Mostly. Tiny bit sour too. "Since it seems near and future timetables are entirely too subjective for any estimation."

Sonya wasn't certain she liked this change, only understanding half of the situation or not. At the very least she hadn't offended him, probably, so she was counting it as a win. She at least knew there was something else to this one, unlike outside Babylon. "Sure."

…it wasn't a 'date as more-than-friends' again, right? That didn't exactly fit this situation, because she and Verde weren't friends. They were going to try being friends. Besides which, he wasn't referencing the kind of dates he might find fun with another person but also possibly a 'lover'… just a future engagement without so much drama and physical distress.

Verde got maybe a step further, before something else occurred to him to speak on. "You do intend to seek medical assistance sometime soon, yes?"

"Look, I get it's alarming and everything… but I can't learn the skill if I run to a nurse every time I get a new injury."

He leveled a highly unimpressed look at her, dipping that sharp green gaze all the way down her form and back up. "Sonya, you forgot you were injured. While asleep, unconscious for a period of rest. Apparently not for the first time, if your companion has taken it upon himself to give warning of repeated trauma. Perhaps you might wish to find a method of learning that isn't potentially harming yourself… possibly permanently, due to this being the way another first learned. Replicating a square centimeter volume of pigskin should convey the exact same experience as replicating a square centimeter of your own flesh and blood-"

"The trick is living flesh, Gilles. I'm not cutting up animals to learn, and I'm not into cutting myself open. I'll get most of it fixed, that I already planned on-"
"Then may I request you only keep the skimmed gunshot on your hip instead of one that has apparently pierced your chest? TWICE?" Interrupted the asshole acidly, and yeah she got he was concerned about them given how often he’d linger over those spots… but that didn't keep him from being annoying. "If only so no one has to inform your child that his second and final godparent seems to have expired from blood loss due to her own negligence."

Fucking low blow. Point, but she didn't have to like it.

…but the one on her hip was the most annoying one she got recently. "I intend to visit a hospital anyways, because I don't want this much 'experience' at once. Thank you very much."

He harrumphed at her on his way past to collect his packed luggage and the little baggy of dog toys with the semi-chewed on handles.

She shot his back on last sour look before getting on with her day by getting dressed finally.

Occasionally, Verde could be a dick. It could be why she liked him better than anyone else she'd met or spent time with over the last couple months.

Why, the hell, did she have such a soft spot for assholes?

…probably because she was one and understood them better.

Dumping her things off on the vanity counter, the thief stilled and took a second to absorb just how much pain was radiating up her legs and through her chest. She was entirely planning on pretending like nothing was wrong, just like how she did last night and the weeks before since being shot that first time, but it was still painful.

A concerning amount. Constantly.

Tiny moments like this, where all she had to do was breathe and be, didn't really help much but made her feel less battered overall. It was going to get worse before it got 'better', she was fully aware of this, and these moments were just her wallowing in self-pity because she really wasn't that 'strong' at heart.

Didn't mean she had to like it, or that she felt less like bawling when she contemplated how her brother survived doing it all these years to the point he turned it into a feature of his career he'd suffer again and again. Willingly.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 19th of October, 1970 continued. Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse, French Republic.)

The museum she picked to get her scroll inspected/translated at had a library. Hilariously enough, last night the moment the curator understood she wanted a possibly priceless document translated and verified at his museum she was personally escorted to it and invited to make use of the library as she wished while his people called in a specialist and got to work on her scroll.

She might've had to take an immediate raincheck on it, due to needing to feed Shamal and Verde before they got even more grumpy after shopping with her, but that didn't mean it was any less stupid.

They invited a thief, into a place with old books. Old, priceless, volumes. Everything from recent publications to a few hardy copies of more common middle-ages tomes in their untranslated glory.
Just because she brought in something maybe old enough to be displayed too.

Now able to spend that time in their library they thoughtlessly invited her into… Sonya was *highly tempted*, beyond tempted, to just take a couple. Or to come back, sooner than her parents would like, and liberate a few unguarded volumes.

It was *practically* an engraved invitation to liberate a choice addition or three to her personal library. She was eating through her own distractions with sometimes single-minded efficiency, and she could do with a couple more given how badly her legs wanted to ache on her even if she swallowed the maximum safe dosage of aspirin two or three hours ago.

Then again, someone coming in with a supposedly ancient scroll needing appraisal could not be a common occurrence. She was a little too noticeable, *especially* with some causal inquiries on just *where* that asshole that set Verde up for a kidnapping got to being passed around this morning as everyone checked out of the hotel.

Keeping her sticky fingers to herself was becoming a rather serious problem, because she knew for *absolute certain* she could just finesse a few of the thinner volumes into hidden pockets in her new purse that was unfortunately very tote-like but had the carrying capacity she needed.

…her old purse finally tore in a way she couldn't repair, thankfully not in the middle of a store while buying Shamal socks but after when she had been trying to wiggle her wallet in between her two current pleasure reading volumes and the French thesaurus she bought because of Verde's mouth. Semi-expected, since she utterly *refused* to replace it before she absolutely had to… but still annoying.

A distraction from her contemplations was not *particularly* objectionable, if only to keep her ass out of stupid-level trouble.

Such a distraction including Verde, old Warhawk #1 and #2, their husbands apparently, that bitchy chemists from the first night, and a couple more 'hanger ons' she didn't remotely want to give any attention to… was another thing entirely.

She just needed *one*, what the hell was this?

The hunched, semi-defensive posture her 'significant other' had informed her of how and why all these people found her. He gave her *such* a disgusted, frustrated look through those thick glasses she had to at least smirk at him or sigh heavily. "I made the mistake of mentioning why you opted not to accompany me this morning."

"*I can see that, Gilles.*" It was a *tiny* bit amusing, but more aggravating as she didn't really know any of these people nor did she wish to wait with them. Regardless, she rose to greet him and not his unholy wealth of followers. Sliding into his held out arms, which *weren't* stiff this time, she shot everyone she didn't know a hopefully neutral look before leaning into the hold for a bastardized hug he wasn't so uncomfortable with as he'd be if she just pored herself into his lap. "And while I can *maybe understand* old Warhawks one and two… and maybe the chemist girl if you really must, the others?"

Two had to be husbands, at the very least. There were five other men to account for, though.

Warhawk #2 snickered wickedly, shooting her equally as elderly friend a superior look. Which was answered by a *repressive* glower of some impressiveness Sonya kind of wanted to learn to pull off, even as #1 kept the chemist-bitch's mouth shut with a vicious pinch to the side.
It was more forthright and utterly blunt than Lisa's mannerisms, which was practically styled into manipulating another into telling her the truth and volunteering whatever she might want without doing anything as crass as directly asking. The thief would admit to some interest in learning.

Maybe.

"They were not invited, I assure you."

"I still don't know how much longer." She warned her 'boyfriend', releasing him and returning to the copy of a document in Vulgar Latin she was trying to make some sense of just for kicks. "So, I'm not sure what you should do with... all these people. This is private business, after all."

"Pretend we're not here." Advised Warhawk #1 smoothly, pointedly wandering off to one of the library shelves as her friend took possession of the chemist-bitch's person and guided her pointedly away with a low muttered conversation.

"This is a public location." Verde sourly admitted to, tiredly, as he plodded along in her wake. Apparently, he had the same argument on her behalf before they showed up and felt the need to convey the result as if she couldn't see for herself. "My apologies."

"You can't control all variables." She could insist they be excluded from whatever report she was waiting for. They could show up, but she didn't have to include them.

"I can damn well try." He snarked back with ill-humor, shooting the hangers-on a dark look over a shoulder they pointedly ignored so he pointedly ignored them back.

Snorting, she seized him by the arm and drew him over to the reading table she was eyeing the middle-age Latin through for the built-in reading light and magnifier. "Was everything that boring they all found it more exciting to follow you here?"

The Lightning didn't respond for a long moment and even his static-laced, gravity defying green hair deflated slightly to match his posture. "Define the term 'boring', additionally elucidate the context of usage as it pertains to the previous event."

Was that... was he referencing a 'spelling-bee'?

Strange, she thought that was a 'US' thing. Then again, it was a competition about how well one could spell words from simple to tricky. It had to apply to all written-spoken languages somewhat equally, and children learned better when they had something to do with that information aside just 'know'.

The question then was, did he ever participate in one and how old had he been the last time?

"That bad?"

"They at least waited for the closing remarks to finish before the volume of conversation inside the conference center became unbearable." He grumped tonelessly, bluntly and totally judging his fellow conference goers even as a couple now shot his back dirty looks as they milled about the shelves uselessly for a lack of anything else to do since she opted to not need introductions. "I encountered your 'Warhawks One and Two' on my hasty way out, who both pressed on inquiries where you might be as they had anticipated the explosion between you and some of the other ladies. They were 'sorely disappointed' in myself for 'letting the lovely spitfire' out of my reach until I could get two words in edgewise to inform them you were attending another intellectual aim in the city suited to your own specialty."
"So... it's my fault for leaving you to your own devices?"

"...I did not state such in any terms."

"But you were thinking it."

Verde shiftily glanced away from her, slightly ruining the impression by continuing to watch her from the corner of his view not blocked by the frames of his glasses. "Perhaps."

Sonya snickered, amused at his mild and entirely not-really-frustrated irritation with his fellow eggheads. Even if she found them annoying too, she could still appreciate the feeling. She felt the same when Hawk decided to join up with her non-existent staff, and before him Verde's own inclusion to the same non-thing.

While she continued making her slow and halting way through the document utilizing mostly forgotten Latin from another lifetime, he decided to make himself comfortable by ripping off the rather cute bowtie from around his neck and stuffing it into a pocket. One glance over what she was reading and he apparently deemed it too boring, migrating on to the nearby shelves to see what material there was to read.

Unfortunately, that gave an opening for Warhawk #1 to come back and ask questions. Thankfully before any of the other assholes had the idea to start pestering her with questions or whatever, but that didn't mean she had to appreciate it.

"How far did you get, my dear?"

"I'm not a 'dear' anything." It only made the older woman smirk in her face, so the thief reluctantly redirected her attention from the yellow pages she couldn't read much of to her to avoid being socially awkward. "Not far, I only finished piecing it back together the best I could in the early hours of Sunday. Then we got... a bit distracted... when I got back to it I realized my piecing back together wasn't entirely correct. I didn't get past translating the 'start' or what was left of the top layers of the document, just checking my work could make sense instead."

The knowing smirk made her trail off, a little confused. "Children do tend to be a distraction, a fine one but one all the same... although, the child seemed to be a bit old for a girl your age to have given birth to him."

Sonya sharply turned to fully face the old bat, moving a touch too fast for comfort, a fixed sharp smile plastered across her lips. "Excuse me, but what business is it of yours?"

"He seems very fond of your young man. My grandson isn't doing nearly so well with my daughter's new one." Warhawk #1 mentioned offhandedly, the tone of polite curiosity not doing a damn thing about hiding the interests she had in the topic. "However did you manage that?"

"...why the hell would I know?" The fact her 'relationship' with a 'new' man was a lie didn't bother Sonya one bit, she didn't particularly like discussing this subject with unknowns and she'd lie until the cows came home if it suited her. "Maybe ask the brat. They're not stupid, just sometimes not thinking everything aspect of something thoroughly enough to realize 'say something' might fix a problem they have."

"That only works if they're self-aware enough to know they might have an issue." Allowed the older woman after a moment of thought, refocusing on the Russian thoughtfully after a thankfully short moment of introspection. "A point, though. A perhaps good one..."

Uh, no it wasn't.
The whole point of verbal languages was to convey meanings from one person to another. How 'asking' was a novel concept escaped her, being young only meant they'd be blunter and less articulate in how the phrased it.

Likely something highly unimpressed crossed her face, or the old bitch had more social experience than her and could somehow divine her disapproval from thin air, because then the subject suddenly changed.

"So now you've toured this 'who's who' of scientific thought gathered together… will you be coming back with young monsieur Verninac again sometime?"

"…it depends." On more factors than she wanted to discuss in public and with some random civilian woman. "When is the next one?"

"Oh, next weekend. In Berlin. The topic will be advances in construction materials and involve a significant number of industrial chemists and architects as guest speakers." Smirking broadly at her now probably utterly confused expression, the older woman elegantly waved a wrist into the air as if that would explain anything. "There's another three scheduled for this same weekend now ending as well, you know. CECAM has many chapters, and members are encouraged to attend whichever workshop or conference they deem coincides with their own spheres of research and they can contribute to. This one was just… a world-wide concern to ease our newest researchers into the waters of international cooperation gently. We all look forward to monsieur Verninac's future contributions in other fields, whichever ones he deems important. His parents would be very proud…"

…the fuck kind of group was this?

"You say that as if you knew them." Sonya decided on commenting on instead of asking what the fucking hell, opting to potentially embarrass herself about how scientific summits worked to the only one she wouldn't mind maybe having a laugh at her incomprehension. "Gilles' parents."

Slightly minded. Just a tiny bit, but needing to ask would be enough of a reason to let Verde laughing at her go.

"As much as you can know someone in a completely different social circle through second-hand information passed on by friends of friend of theirs." Her features softened a tiny bit, the crow's feet at the corner of her eyes tightening in contrast as the lines around her lips relaxed almost as if she was going to smile for real this time. "His father's illness was somewhat known of in specific groups, they were looking for some treatment that might extend his life expectancy for a few years until the two just… apparently gave up. Stayed in, completely disappeared from everything… then all of a sudden a very young monsieur Verninac very neatly argued himself out of an orphanage and into emancipation for his final two years of childhood before any of us realized he was on his own. I'm not exactly sure what happened to his mother, a broken heart is the only thing I heard."

…it if she had bothered, it was entirely possible Sonya could've learned of all this from either world news or Verde himself. The man hadn't seemed all that interested in comparing life stories beyond his nationality with anyone, from what Adrik had to say of his friend, but that didn't mean he was against talking about it if asked.

She wasn't sure if she cared or wasn't interested, but it had to do with one of hers so she was listening anyways even if she was slightly annoyed this woman was gossiping about Verde's… previous family?

Something like that…
"Morbid." Decided the thief shortly. "I was aware the human mind is complex enough to convince the flesh of a variety of illnesses and complications that they do not actually have cause for, not that 'dying of a broken heart' was actually possible."

"Stress is a killer, no matter what flavor you want to label it." Warhawk #1 shrugged the implication of dubiousness off easily, glancing over what she had been trying to read before refocusing on her.

She had to accept that at face-value, it wasn't like she was going to go poking around just to see if anyone had a different idea for the Lightning's mom's cause of death. It could, probably not but there was a possibility, be interesting… but investigating a dead woman important to one of her minions seemed kind of really fucking rude. Somehow.

Especially looking into someone's dead mom.

"What in the world do you expect to gain from coming here?" Sonya suddenly changed the subject, not remotely interested in this topic but it should at least be poked at twice or so. "I'm not wildly a fan of any of you, and you're annoying Gilles by inviting yourselves along."

"Because you're a hard woman to pin down." Confessed the older woman easily enough with a half-smirk on her painted lips as she watched her expectantly, but the thief wasn't feeling like giving her any information through body language alone. "There are so many conferences and think tanks that the likelihood my husband will be attending the same one yours is actually isn't very good. If I wanted a word with you before you go, I had to do it now."

…but, Verde wasn't her husband. The comparison kind of failed there.

"You're making the assumption I want to talk to you." Sonya pointed out silkily, planting both hands on her hips in order to not cross her arms in something one could make erroneous assumptions of 'defensive posture' from. "I have one Gilles… what, exactly, makes you think I need you for anything?"

"A fine question, mademoiselle de Mort. Cuts straight to the point, almost ruthlessly. Can I not be concerned that a young man of my country showed up publicly attached to the hip with a Communist woman?"

…quaint.

"For your information, I'm legally a resident of Italy. I emigrated on a business visa a year ago. Not quite legally on the Soviet Union side, but legally according to Italy's government."

"That's nice." She countered as if passing judgement on the quality of the day's weather, not Sonya's personal history.

The 'Communist' Russian tilted her head to the side, mildly amused but more a little disgusted with Warhawk #1's sheer stupidity on maybe possibly trying to pick a fight with such a transparently futile point. "Such a benefit Gilles has in your fucking concern… you were such a great help in extracting him from the States when he came to the attention of shady factions there. Oh… wait, no. You were of no assistance whatsoever. I'd know, I was the one that enabled his extraction."

Queerly, the older woman smiled at her fondly. "How much trouble have you had with the KGB?"

Sonya merely narrowed her eyes.

"Spies work best in the dark, my dear. The wider you're known, the less likely they're directly work..."
against you and harm him in your loss. The best I can do to 'help' young monsieur Verninac is to offer my influences to spread your reputation wide and far as a historian in my circles. Which, you will need to be aware of to make use of the offer. I'm perfectly aware doing so directly will only put myself and my family in the way of harm, so there's excuses to be made."

"...I appreciate it, but I am known in very specific circles as it is. Not as a historian, admittedly... and my brother is working on making himself famous enough we both will not need to worry of anything but the most suicidal of the KGB agents abroad." Was it genuine help, or her attempting to 'keep a closer eye' on the situation through some kind of misplaced guilt/responsibility? "You are a few years too late, and a little too far removed."

Either the lady was that petty and stupid to hope to hook her on taking a baited hook, or she was semi-competent in 'clandestine assistance'. Which one applied...?

There was a wryly bitter twist to the painted lips now. "I know."

Sonya was not interested in playing with a baited hook, but the attempt was respectable. Kind of. Entirely too late, but understandable in a kind of civilian-pathetic way. "I highly doubt I'll attend another of these events with Gilles again. I'm not that insecure on his intentions to need to stay welded to his hip every day of the week. Thank you, but there is not a reason to put your grandsons at risk for our sake."

She didn't have time to maintenance that kind of reputation requiring a heavy amount of actual knowledge and work, not if what she suspected would come to be. Maybe after she did Aziz's island-stealing, but probably not. Odds were something else would come up to eat her free time and make it impossible to network this far outside her circle of interests.

That lack of intent on her end would show what kind of intent she was dealing with from this woman.

"I look forward to whenever our next meeting might be, then." Warhawk #1 capitulated gracefully with, unlike a nosey Italian grandmother she could name, nodding her head to the library's entrance way where the curator of the museum was rather impatiently waiting out their conversation.

The slightly unhealthily looking man hurried forward as the older woman left, trying for a grin but failing horribly short at it. "You wouldn't happen to be interested in selling your find to the museum, would you?"

Verde, apparently not all that far away and more than likely the next isle over eavesdropping like a good boy trying to keep himself safe and informed, snorted harshly. That apparently answered for her, amusingly enough.

The man wilted to match his horribly wrinkled suit and scuffed leather loafers, letting himself seem as tired and wired as he really was instead of pretending otherwise. "I thought not, mademoiselle de Mort. I had to ask..."

"What's the verdict on the scroll, then?" Prodded the thief, interested despite herself and knowing full well that showing anything could be used against her. If he was asking to buy it from her, it was either a good fake they could make some use of or genuine.

"It is not a scroll on Stoic Physics, it's a scroll on a philosopher ascribed to be a believer of Stoic Physics called Crates of Mallus. Founder of the Pergamon school of grammar, and seems to have been at one time the head of the library of Pergamon... in modern-day Turkey." Allowed the guy somewhat older than her Lightning scientist but younger than the husbands of the Warhawks, very
obviously exhausted to his credit. It spoke of staying up with his minions scurrying about to make
sense of the find before Sonya left France and took her property with her out of their grips. It took
out a lot of the emphasis and natural flamboyance he had to him last night when they met, which
queerly reassured her more about his intents than any combination of words might've. \"Written
centuries after his death, alas... however. It is a copy of Crates of Mallus' elegy, as it was recalled
nearly some seven centuries afterwards when we can approximate as when the scroll was written.\"

"...huh. So the guy who sold it hadn't lied to me, he just got the wrong library?\"

The curator withdrew a crumpled handkerchief from an inner vest pocket, dabbing at his forehead to
blot the sweat trying to cool him down from who knew what kind of activity before this meeting.
"Mademoiselle de Mort, if I may beg a great favor from you... would you allow us to transcribe and
translate your scroll fully? The knowledge that could just be at our fingertips, waiting to be
discovered..."

"Will I ever see my document ever again?" Sonya inquired dryly, vaguely aware of Verde heading
off anyone interested in the conversation by his very pointed glower and the sheer volume of
disproval he could condense into a look to give her time to sort out the minor details without
undesired interjections.

"Of course you will." Sniffed the older Frenchman in insult, elevating his nose at her before taking a
second to inspect her from head to toe. "You... are not French."

"Russian. Excuse the pessimism. Apparently we're a lot more dour in person than most seem to
expect."

He pondered that, but the expression highlighted his disagreement long before he spoke. "Not dour,
very grounded and realistic perhaps. I almost suspected you were a modern-day Stoic philosopher
yourself."

...generous of him. Probably.

She still didn't know what Stoic Physics were.

"I'm not comfortable with leaving the scroll behind, but that does not mean I'm not interested in a
professional translation. How long with transcribing a clean copy to work on take?"

The guy was too old and professional to fidget guiltily... however he was also not good enough to
conceal the sharp pang of it to her eyes. He didn't regret taking liberties with being the one asked to
verify the document, but he did know full well it could harm him later.

Like she would have a problem with understandable pragmatism at a surprise opportunity to secure
his museum's own position and advantage in the face of an unknown. "...alright. How long until
your people finish transcribing a clean copy?"

It took him barely a second to adjust to the blatant permission to do exactly what he knew was going
on already, excited all over again probably while thinking of what there might be to discover in the
ancient document. "Shouldn't be more than another few days, at the least. Forgive us for the liberty,
but you seemed to be one a tight time schedule when we spoke last..."

...if she left Hawk to grab her scroll and take it home with him, she could 'escort' Verde to the airport
to get him home immediately instead of the Storm. The scientist might appreciate some hours of
freedom in his home country, without needing to keep himself in a bodyguard's view. "I'll leave a
man here to take the scroll once you're done. Honestly, I'd prefer a professional's work to learn from
than guesswork if I have the choice, so the liberty is entirely suited to my tastes."

The 'bodyguard' might appreciate a lengthy amount of the exact same thing, honestly. She had the suspicions Hawk's 'a step back' guarding had been engineered on purpose by what's his face, the Mafia Land agent, to avoid having the Storm's evolving personality from irritating the Lighting's established one into something explosive.

It was something she might see being pulled by someone not exactly sure about Flame user 'friction' between the various types but knowing it could happen. Theoretically not or ill-understood, so the whole topic was manipulated to not occur at all on his time.

At least, something pulled by someone that had two clues to rub together and wasn't fucking retarded.

This guy, and she should probably get his name soon before she left instead of keep referring him to 'the curator', heaved something like a sigh crossed with a shudder. "Fabulous, mademoiselle. I had hoped you would not take offense, our specialist on Hellenistic Greek is a… forceful one. He had the transcribing started and well on it's way before I realized just why he required so many others to assist him verifying the document."

…ah, now she understood why Warhawk #1 had the time to confront her. Sonya wondered just how long the curator had dreaded this conversation, and exactly how much time he wasted practicing just how he was going to have this conversation in his head to somehow get out of it without a really pissed off 'historian' on his hands.

Well, no one really got anywhere in this world without risks. Sometimes stupid risks, but gambles on chance and whim. It may not have been what it was claimed to be, but as she fully suspected she bought just a trashy mockup of something real the fact it was something was surprising enough to put her in an instant good mood.

At least, a better one than she had been pretending to have.

"I got the scroll in a black market in Limassol, Cyprus. It was one of about five, all the fragments I have are from that pile." Sonya offered with audible amusement, aware Verde had deemed himself done with 'distraction' duties and was coming back. "They were stored in a wicker basket."

That noise he made was a cross between a dismayed groan and a hiss of pure outrage. His taught, drawn features suddenly flushed with some unhealthy color to boot, likely as aware as she was that kind of climate and storage was not good for ancient paper.

"There's probably still four more the vendor's hawking as scrolls from the Library of Alexandria, if someone requires distracting."

"I almost don't wish to reward him that way… but by God, someone needs to rescue the others." Already distracted, likely calculating on just how he was going to get someone to a little island-nation in the middle of the far western part of the Mediterranean Sea with enough money, he doffed her a little salute/bow thing. "I must cut this short, mademoiselle… I'll have him deliver an apology and the contact information to your man so you may remain informed on the transcribing and translation as it happens."

"Sure." Allowed the thief as he walked off on her before he had even finished.

"Congratulations." Verde deadpanned in his wake, looking mildly affronted with how suddenly loud everyone in the library was at the curator's hasty exit. "Why inform anyone where you found the
item if it is important enough someone will risk their very credibility and reputation to work upon without your permission?"

"Eh… it might be something he thinks can make his career, or something. Besides, I'm basically an unknown. And… I really have no plans on going back to Cyprus, so if they can find the guy they can have the rest." She slanted a look sideways and up at him. "Want to bolt before everyone stops pretending talking to each other is more important than trying to gossip with either you or me?"

Verde was six steps beyond her on his way out of the library before she could finish. With a bark of a laugh that maybe attracted too much attention, she snagged her purse and darted off after him before someone else wanted a word with her.

(Thursday the 22nd of October, 1970. Body Avenue, Mafia Land.)

Slithering into the meeting point midway down the most 'public and neutral' place Mafia Land residents knew of on the island, Viper's expectations were met when one of them immediately turned to face the Mist and the other belatedly followed a second later.

Very slowly. These days those unfamiliar with Dying Will Flame users were finding reasons to learn more and arm themselves with an edge over other non-Flame users. The culture imposed by upholding Omertà did not encourage the spread of information, which impeded those looking to broaden their horizons… but not entirely.

As showcased by the Irish tough working with an Egyptian Rain to get a crash-course in how to deal with other Flame types. Such as a Mist.

The smarter criminals were making learning happen anyways, in trickles and drips until they could force a method's valves wide open or drowned. Viper approved of the prudence enough to cut down their antics, the two would still be charged full price but wouldn't need to deal with an ignorance surcharge or six.

Sabra the Rain slowly drifted to a forward position, and while the Irish-born Quinn wasn't excluded from the confrontation… he was left in a more supportive position that allowed him to observe both Flame users fully.

The Esper allowed it to stand instead of either immediately relocating or rearranging them to his own liking, which probably informed the Rain of entirely too much.

Viper was getting as sick of the uninformed doing outright suicidal actions as the rest of them who happened to be able to lite themselves on spiritual fire. It wouldn't save the two from paying the full fee, but they'd at least limit the amount of extra fees topped on if he could think of any.

"We are, to begin obviously, looking for someone." Sabra began the incident with, a very interesting utilization of Tranquility stifling any errant noise the pavement below wanted to make as he made tiny adjustments in response to the foot traffic around the three of them. "I have informed myself of your prices… and how to best motivate your interests."

Likely, not how to avoid paying to 'encourage' Viper's interests. So easy… it was almost criminal. "Are you at least informed on how to eliminate undesired candidates from your search? Mou… do you know how I track someone?"

The swarthy skinned Egyptian slid a folded piece of paper out of their loosely tied long-sleeved shirt, handing it over without a flourish.
The Mist didn't physically reach out to accept it, the Rain was a fairly successful hostage taker when examples were needed by his countrymen and specialized in growing riots to unmanageable proportions on the side. There were rumors on how a Rain could incite that much trouble, and he didn't wish to gain that information personally.

He also wouldn't pay any damn currency either, but it was a principle of the matter.

Invisible Constructed hands made of nothing but air currents unfolded the sheet, which proved to be a stolen page of a Mafia Land agent's contractual will.

More specifically, one Renato Sinclair's. Italian Mafia, Catholic hitman, and one 'not' known to have ever dealt with the miser in any public setting.

Having been already fulfilled, the will for a 'dead' agent should've been disposed of some weeks ago when his executor returned the file to the island as completed. Very interesting someone managed to save a page the hitman had written on personally.

Viper had the suspicions someone in the shaken ranks of the CEDEF would pay good money for that tidbit. Plugging a security hole after the sheer embarrassment of one of Mafia Land's free agents murdering their former head for infringing on her subordinate students in the hospital would recover a small bit of respect they had lost for the public spanking.

They tried to hide why Sonya murdered their former head… the fact they tried made it even more pointedly obvious why there wasn't a death-squad sent after the thief for her sheer gall.

Raising a hand, the Esper caught the bundle of papers gently lobbed in his direction from the Irishman with the cloak hiding everything but the triangle tattoos on his face. It took less than a second to understand it was roughly equivalent to two thousand euros and contained four hundred and six separate bills of two hundred Egyptian pound notes.

…well informed, but not quite applying the information in the right manner. Viper still wasn't touching anything with his own hands, it all needed to be sorted and scrubbed before he'd trust it enough to thumb through, as he contemplated the situation as he sucked the bundle of money into a free-floating pocket for storage and later accounting.

The Rain very obviously had tried, genuinely, to not trip over each and every one of the miser's buttons. Research had been done, not only on how to get the Mist's help but also how best to arrange the meeting. That they had stomped on something regardless was prepared for, and given to the more unused to Flame user individual so if they must interrupt at the very least it wouldn't be poorly received.

It was not their fault they were inquiring about a previous job Viper had done almost no one else knew of being done, and the pay was not enough to top the money the hitman had paid to erase his tracks for him.

"...mou. There are sixteen 'Renato Sinclairs' in the world, only three of which have had or intend to write a will." Droned the Mist tonelessly, making an obvious show of being greedily calculative of the Irishman to fool the Rain into thinking he was aiming to shake more out of the greenhorn. The fact it was true, if not entirely the full story, would help ease the Rain's natural suspicions of a non-Muslim character and a Mist user overall. "Sixteen, separate, Thoughtography maps… or three?"

The only drawback to Mist Flames, in his ever so humble opinion… was that Mists were a little too far exposed to those looking for the right sensation. Anyone, everyone, sensitive enough could tell more of how a Mist felt than Viper really found necessary. Most could only tell one or two were
nearby, but those that were sensitive to more… especially other Flame users like one that could nullify vibrations in air… it was rather irksome when he ran across wary or hostile Flame users not easily fooled.

Now then as to his 'clients'… professionalism, and capitulation even if he would not require all sixteen, or prudence and ticking off the Mist by being cheap?

This was not anything official, given the single page of an already fulfilled will hanging in the air held closed against casual spying, the price was not going to be covered by a third-party. How strongly did either, or even just one of the two, believe Sinclair was not as dead as reported?

Viper did highly appreciate the issue was brought to him instead of needing to meddle with another tracking-gifted Mist, it made his job neater and tidier. That would not save them the fees that came with associating or hiring his abilities for their own use, but at least the precautions Sinclair had paid dearly for were left to gather more strength than need to ward off another Mist attempting to find what was concealed behind them.

It would be ever so much simpler if the bloody Mafioso would just divorce his sense of self from his 'Christian' name already, but then again Catholics were touchy about the name they were baptized under and Viper had know it well before needing to erase another man's past for him.

Perhaps a visit, and mentioning than being baptized twice was not actually against Christian doctrine was in order?

…that might be Protestant beliefs, on second thought. Were Catholics the 'once and only once' type?

A visit this soon, after a confrontation about the subject, was also unwise. Left up to the Mafioso then, he certainly hadn't paid for any future meddling on his behalf… but he might be able to wring concessions from a particular Russian thief if mentioned in a few months… perhaps even some jewels or bars of precious metals again.

Hilariously, perhaps even Cherep would feel the need to 'safeguard' his nephew's godfather if… no, his friend wasn't informed yet. Hmm…

"All sixteen." Decided Sabra the Egyptian Rain, no inflection to his tone aside that soft professionalism giving away what his internal dilemma might've been. The pause spoke of nothing else, and caused the Rain and Mist to study each other thoughtfully across the two meters of space between them.

Just before the Irishman would've reached for another prepared bundle of cash, the miser spoke up. "The dead included, mou… or can you do without those three?"

Quinn shot his associate a look, earning not a twitch for another long moment as the Egyptian weighted his choices and chances. "Only if… they're new."

"There's a shallow grave in the Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park." Viper informed the other blandly, expectantly waiting to see if the suspicion would be proven or if the Rain would show some pragmatism. "Undiscovered, I believe. Mou, but it does fit your criteria."

He'd come to a horrible fate if he chose that, eventually. It might not be the safest hobby when there wasn't some job to do or money to count… but it amused the Mist highly. Well, causing horrible demises without anyone catching on and awaiting the very first time someone put the not entirely hidden clues together about just how bitchy he could be.

The grave was an empty one, filled with the body of someone that pissed off Viper some time ago
and just deserved a fiery fate. That it wasn't actually the hitman they were looking for would be hard to tell, this far into decomposition and under all the charred and blackened remains.

A death without a grave was just begging for some idiotic do-gooder to foolishly attempt something stupid. Viper was always prepared, perhaps to a ridiculous degree but then again… Mist.

A Flame user dying by fire was going to be a little tricky to pull off. Thankfully, that moronic idiot hadn't been exactly dead at the time he had been buried.

The other half of Sinclair's payment. A non-death of a very specific height, build, and national identity that had annoyed the Mist to a specific if not urgent point. Caused while he was on his way out of his home country, untraceable to being caused by a gun-wielding hitman with Sun Flames, on a target of Viper's choosing.

It was rare they had the opportunity to just watch, and it had been a treat indeed to watch the man at work.

At the gesture, Quinn the Irishman tossed the last bundle of money at Viper before darting down a side-street for freedom from the meeting. Sabra the Rain remained behind. "Fourteen maps, then. Now, the price per map… is there a discount for more than ten at once? Or an extra charge?"

Ah, this one knew to bribe and haggle at the same time. Vanishing the second sum to join the first, after verifying it amounted to and counted out the same way, the miser settled into his third-favorite and most public distraction characteristic to enjoy.
Chapter 35

(Friday the 23rd of October, 1970. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Sonya semi-sort of got the idea Kappel was beyond pissed with her without the need to glance at his puckered-sour face or the rapid tapping of his fingers against his lab coat as Rasputin was hastily called up by his second dedicated nurse to deal with her.

Suspicions were apparently one thing but coming back with more holes than rumor had her full of made her physician rather cross with… everything to do with her. Revealing she did nothing but some 'semi-occult' Flame patchwork thing over each and every one of them had actually rendered the ex-Nazi utterly speechless for ten full seconds, something she absently counted out because the whole weekend she had been perfectly aware Verde would start getting nervous if she didn't reply fast enough to beat his brain to second guessing his behavior or words.

He gave her this impression of speechless aggravation all without saying one damn word, too. Then again, poor Avdotya blanched nearly bone-white before scrambling around for the implements to treat all the injuries in her legs before asking which Sun on staff to call.

…grievous bodily harm, right. Tended to be alarming and all, she was just trying not to think about it like that.

Then of course there was the argument of security verses immediate medical care… which finished the last of Kappel's patience and resulted in a Sun Flame practicing mortician being called up from the basement for some practice on a living person for once.

Curiously, under the Cloud Voodoo, her chest wounds had semi-closed. Not so much the skin, which was how she lost all that blood much to Verde's complete confusion. The muscle underneath looked almost shredded as well, a healthy shredded under a well of fresh blood before snow white bandages were pressed against them to prevent more bleeding.

That might've been what the sandpaper-like feeling had been all about, her faked cells were being crowded out by real flesh splitting off and forming new cells after a couple days. Which pressed the more durable Propagated cells against the raw edges of her wound, because fake plug or not there was still the issue of the puncture wounds themselves.

Sonya wasn't entirely sure, hence the 'practice' part of all this, but perhaps she needed to 'scale back' the Voodoo slowly to match how scratchy her injuries got. It was something to do about the itchy sensation… and Alek would be good for ensuring she didn't spring a leak in the meantime.

"All of it." Snarled the German in his native language, dourly glowering at her with the silent dare to protest.

She did him one better. "Keeping the skinned hip."

"I do not recommend."

"Yeah, got that much."

Her physician drew himself up, which yet again following the trend of men she seemed to be surrounded by at least topped her own height by another ten or so centimeters, to add that tiny bit more to the whole 'look down his nose at her' thing. "If you do not report every injury to me, from this point on, I will not continue treating you. There is caring for someone in a dangerous career,
and then there's actively assisting one's slow slide into suicidal or harmful behaviors. You will be honest, you will submit to all tests and checkups, or you will need to find a new doctor."

Sonya thought about it.

Kappel wasn't someone she liked, Tatiana did so she gave the man a general pass on that aspect. He was a necessity she had not expected and wished to retain.

He had already been broken in when it came to Flame users and the many, varied ways they could end up killing themselves with a fire-based ability controlled by willpower alone. Repeating the 'Clouds can break a lot of stuff' lesson and 'Storms might just end up temporarily immune to medical procedures' thing with someone new might not turn out so well. He merely calculated the risks and effects at the time, instead of doing something useless like panic or insist on his interpretation over her and her sister's understanding of events.

Finding a new physician, with the required medical license and experiences to qualify as an even half-decent replacement, was not something she could dedicate a whole lot of time to right now. This wasn't counting his slowly growing familiarity with Dying Will Flame users, in particular Clouds as a type, nor his semi-unasked-for assistance keeping an eye on all her stupid medical students more or less acting independent of her but held up under her reputation anyways.

Aside all that, there was the little issue that Kappel was echoing some of what Verde snipped at her that last morning in the hotel.

At the very least, she could bump up her estimation of the man's intelligence a notch or two. Smart people were getting kind of hard to find these days, losing one more wasn't quite what she was feeling like doing right now.

"Fine." Capitulated the thief, sliding just a tiny bit to the side so the squares of folded bandages pressed between her back and the wall behind the gunnery she was seated upon wouldn't itch more than it had started to already. "Be prepared for phone calls from my Lackey at odd times."

"Ach, nee." Drawled the man sarcastically, stooping to snatch his broken reading glasses from the floor.

"Are you allowed to pick and choose your patients?" Sonya inquired sugary sweetly, mildly curious of the answer but it was something she'd ask of Tatiana once-

"No." Kappel informed her shortly, popping out the other lens and tossing that into the rubbish bin set next to his desk. A new pair was withdrawn from the long and thin top drawer that normally held writing utensils and loose paper files, the empty frames tucked into the case the newer pair had been concealed within and replaced back into the drawer. "Hence the German. It's not an official hospital conversation unless held in English."

"...how the hell-"

"The hospital's founder was an Englishman. A black-market doctor imported and bribed heavily to ensure he stayed long enough to establish the hospital and the policies therein. Left his mark in a few ways no one could erase after his leave taking, so all staff are fully aware he was here even if no one knows his name anymore nor what happened to him."

…ah. Mafia Land wasn't that old as a concept or a destination, twenty or some odd years ago when the island was being built would put it squarely at the mercy of World War Two era criminal factions. With all the money being flushed out of Germany's borders as it was sacked, obviously
some disgustingly expensive 'public' works were slated or completed with the appropriated funds. She only suspected St. Julian's was part of that… but given the sensibilities of humans in general?

Using the suffering of others to fund or progress their pet projects was always a good idea.

Sonya waited out Rasputin's arrival, his expression of dubious disbelief to Kappel's short explanation that morphed into alarmed panic upon realizing she really was full of holes and he was the only Sun allowed within ten feet of her with her sister in Moscow, and half the healing before she sorted out and decided what she felt about the whole confrontation.

Hard to quantify, but she picked mildly annoyed and slightly exasperated to label her muddled feelings under the insistent pain nagging her. It was in his sphere of expertise, and to the uninformed an utterly stupid pick to not obtain medical care for any injury immediately… but the ability was practically geared to avoid any need for a medical professional's help. The only thing that would happen from her honestly reporting her injuries to avoid his next miniature meltdown would be Kappel's continued development of ulcers.

If he wanted to stress himself out over her, he could. She didn't see why he'd want to, but if it was his choice then more power to him. The slightly dubious conversation wasn't really the worse she had been subjected to and she hadn't threatened Verde's body integrity for talking to her that way, so Kappel could slide under that bar too.

…despite the fact Rasputin dealt with mainly dead people, the kid was still a Sun. His healing was weirdly twitchy-like jolts instead of just a warm itch, likely from learning how to Activate not quite dead but dying cells into knitting the best they could when the body was already starting the process of decay and any elements or building blocks to do so were scarce at best.

In short, the necromantic Sun took entirely too long to heal her… but she understood the living wasn't his usual responsibility, so she didn't mention either his slow progress or how strange the sensation was.

What Rasputin was, was a perfectionist. Slow, but thorough. Which, given he was healing what amounted to puncture wounds that went entirely through her flesh, wasn't a problem. By the time Sonya tuned back into reality after having her moment to think, the teenager had most of her legs done and skipped the graze on her hip to contemplate how he wanted to approach her upper chest.

Utterly understandable in a way, if one wanted to leave a good-looking corpse in this lifestyle one had to cheat hardcore for it. Dying Will Flames were one kind of cheating, a necromancy gifted Sun Flame user was another.

"Any more problems with the CEDEF, Rasputin?"

The teenager snorted, mostly to her abs as he adjusted to reach a different injury down her calf. "No, after you 'displayed your displeasure' with them and piked the head on a desk the incidents all stopped. Imagine that. I got a very nice letter from Ganauche the Lightning Guardian telling me in polite tones that your protest of my treatment has been noted and an investigation launched internally, so… if I could mention to you that just a word to nurse Primakova would be suitable next time you felt like 'bitching'…?"

"Noted. You can claim you told me if you want to write back." Rasputin's next rude sounding scoff informed her that would not in fact be done, as he peeled the bandages the Storm nurse had been holding to her frontal hip injuries away to see the damage.
"Miss Bazanova, why is this one half-healed yet raw and irritated as if it just happened?"

"Because it is."

The Sun shot her a confused look, pressing his fingers on either side on the older injury into to the pockets of dead/compromised cells in the ringed bruises.

That pocket of dead or dying flesh around her injuries might be helping the Sun out in healing her, on second thought. Obviously the torn and severed cells that made up the walls of her injuries had to go somewhere once crowded out by Cloud Flame flesh, and with no easy escape it was all just shoved to a side. All sides, restrained by her skin and showing up as bruises.

It was the first test Kappel ordered for her, just to be sure she wasn't brewing something nasty in the pockets. She got the idea of his ordering her blood tested perfectly well, but if she had no signs of anything by this point then it wasn't really likely there was anything in the bruises to bother with and her protest had been what started the whole discussion that ticked off the good doctor to begin with.

Although, of course, her protest for a belated and probably unnecessary battery of blood work being done had been overridden with a short summery of necrotic flesh and the risks inherent in contracting gangrene.

…probably why Kappel wanted all injuries she self-treated declared early and instantly, so he could trace back any side effects back to wherever and whenever she got injured.

Sonya sighed heavily, mentally giving her doctor the point.

It looked as if Fong got to babysit Alek all day today. Hopefully her pup won't mind that much, although she was aware that expectation was unrealistic. The martial artist seemed weirdly pleased with guarding her dog for her this morning, for some reason…

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(Saturday the 24th of October, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana’s Apartment, Mafia Land.)

**Bjørn** laid out the rental contracts on the kitchen table, which had turned to glass sometime in the last couple months when he hadn't been paying enough attention. Then he turned to a fresh page in his current notebook and pulled one of his fountain pens out of his vest's breast pocket.

Renting commercial retail space on Mafia Land was, as they expected, hellishly complicated. If the Lackey was a betting man, and he was, he'd put significant money on the miles of red tape and needed insurance pulling duty both as a discouragement of trendy trades that might prove flimsy in the long run and a retaining hold on any semi-decent money makers regardless if they would want to stay as Mafia Land vendors or not in ten or so years.

Then again, the business proposal he was working on was intricately wedded to Dying Will Flame users. It wasn't like there was anywhere else in the world a 'Flame Stone' matching service could be established.

The logistical problems broke down in a few simple categories, that would not be so simple to muster before a still theoretical 'grand opening' day. Supply and demand, overhead and staff needs, security and any needed furnishing, then the stock.

The stock was entirely simple, he worked for a professional thief after all. Not only did his patron agree to provide the raw materials when she informed him of this idea, she had two men who had worked on eliminating variables to manufacture a purer type of crystal that was even more Flame-friendly and durable. That was the stock taken care of, and Bjørn could calculate price from the
already existing jewel-trading industry if not how much to mark up any sales to keep the still theoretical store in the black.

Overhead was more complicated, obviously there would need to be at least a handful of hires included into the calculations of rental costs and what passed as criminal insurance policies. The physical place was equally as complicated, they needed a stationary shopfront and not a roving vendor's cart just to cut down on the number of morons that would attempt to steal from his Lady which reduced the amount of choices available but there were still options.

The need for an actual storefront also led into the need for furnishings and staff. He was perfectly aware Verde was not impressed with the man-made island on his visit and equally so Peter McScruffy would not appreciate needing to return either. At least one courier they could trust not to skim off the top for their own reasons, two salespeople if not more depending on demand, a manager to keep on top of daily needs, and guards. Then there needed to be enough funds to pay them and the rental of the store… hopefully generated from sales alone but until he had any idea of what kind of numbers would be generated, he couldn't count on that.

Then display cases, containers, boxes to sell the Flame stones likely disguised as jewelry, possibly a commission for a uniform design for all staff, the cost for the actual uniforms in whatever sizes and for whichever gender for however many they hired, the stock materials to hold the stones in fittings however some customer wanted to carry it, and even water and electricity bills… he could guess, but until something was confirmed in hard numbers then Björn could not assume he could cover all of it.

…and, unless they wanted to go for 'ironically suitable' to what they'd be referred as in the coming years, there kind of needed a name for the proposed store. Which would include trademarking, promotional advertising once it was closer to being opened, trademark protection, and inscribing whatever name or imagery into all supplies and furnishings.

At least one set of uniforms for all staff would need to be purchased by the not yet established company, or perhaps two?

Pulling back and eyeing the complicated mess of writing that grew and grew across the yellow lined pages without permission, the Lackey sighed tiredly as he flipped to a clean new page.

As Viper would inform him ever so tartly 'if you think it's too complicated… reduce the scope you are responsible for, simplify it to base problems alone, mou… and stop complicating this shit more than you must. Half the time complicated problems tend to be mental more than actual problems.'

It would be a high-end class boutique, minimal furnishings and stock until he could get some idea of the demand and expectations of the clientele. Elegant but minimalist would then need to be the design from the furnishing to uniforms and supplies, and would artificially inflate the at a glance estimation of whatever prices would be charged of customers, but the price would have to be also enough to pay at least one worker's wages and insurance plus the rental costs and at least ten percent then compensating Verde and Scruffy for their time/effort to start with.

At first they could use the physical shopfront as the selling point for a commissioned-based business until he could estimate they could afford to have a stock present in any amount and keep hold of it on a criminal-friendly island while also making at least some kind of funds to generate more. That would reduce the need of staff down to one, and Sonya had already picked out a likely candidate from those she knew from frequenting Mafia Land for most of her career.

The price would have to be raised after they switched from commissioned based to supply and demand, which could also be adjusted for possibly controlling demand artificially to keep the business going over coming years instead of allowing just all and sundry to obtain a matched Flame
As for 'promotional' advertising… with criminal habits being what they were they could expect at least some days or weeks of nothing but sweet talk and no sales. No one here would trust something at face value, but also if they reached Mafia Land at all it meant they were at least a touch more careful and savvier than their fellows. They would wait until someone else took the first dive to see what there might be to get, and even then it wasn't likely anything would happen reasonably quickly. Bjørn could short-circuit it entirely by using his Lady’s associate Fong and the Wo-tribe of Triad organizations.

He would have to trade something to the Storm for the service of free advertising, a show of faith in the store’s purpose, and a public confirmation of their reliability to be established all in the first few days… but that was small potatoes compared to paying the fees Mafia Land charged through gross profit instead of out of pocket.

…that was staff, place, funds, insurance risks, and service to be sold. A method, the general idea refined to a concept, and advertising.

Well, in that case, once the rental agreement was paid in full and the supply/stock sorted out the Lackey could probably open that same week. Setting that stack of paperwork to one side, as his Lady would need to speak with the men she was aiming to enable with the proposal first before he could continue, he then turned to the next awaiting logistical problem.

Namely, the eight or more heists Sonya needed to retain her hold on the apartment and the possible ten more they might need with the nurse distracted by syndicate matters. Bjørn was not certain that Tatiana's stint in Moscow was an acceptable reason to only 'pay' two thirds of what their rental agreement asked for, and so he would prefer to err on the side of caution if he could.

Except… that would mandate two if not three contracts per week to get everything sorted as he wanted, and putting aside the somewhat abrupt end to the last 'binge week' heists in Mexico… there was the little matter of a dearth of thief-orientated jobs coming in right now.

What there was, when he recently checked after being informed his patron was on her way back to the island but before he learned her intent was to visit the hospital more than anything else, were too far apart to set up in a general line. Which left the main issue of arranging contracts for Sonya to complete the travel requirements and two months away deadline looming over everything.

They had cherry picked through the older contracts already, the type to be left open for years in hopes of some upcoming young ruffian picking it up eventually. Which had been picked over before again and again by older thieves who had business nearby or just wanted a challenge years ago before Sonya started using them to pad out her contract numbers.

…Bjørn wasn't looking forward to what shitty contracts he had to pick from next that might be in the direction they wanted but covered subject his patron disliked.

Where had they not covered yet, aside the bulk of the African continent and the Middle East?

The People's Republic of China, so long as they avoided the Wo Triads' collective territory. Perhaps now she would not be against any Asian-based contracts, as her main concern with being hunted in the region has been solved. The United States, except for a little slice of California. For that matter, now she lived in Italy, Soviet Russia itself not just the nearby Soviet satellite states. Canada, maybe… then again, maybe not.

Did Canada have any criminal syndicates?
What would they steal, maple syrup?

…actually, he semi-sort of recalled a Black-Market Spice Trade contract for maple syrup. So, apparently Canada did have jobs for aspiring thieves.

Rubbing his face tiredly, he got up from the table and wandered to the fridge to get himself something to drink.

Something else to talk to her about, when she returned from her overnight stay-turned-a-few-days-stay in the hospital.

Armed with a glass of apple juice with a few cubes of ice, the Lackey turned around… and very nearly dropped the cup at the sight of something else laying on the table's surface. He certainly would've noticed a black envelope mixed in with his rudimentary to-do-lists and calculations in all yellows and whites, how in the world that got there when he didn't put it there was a little… beyond…

Putting the juice down, on a glass table so no fears of condensation rings Tatiana would cheerfully butcher him for, he poked the envelope with the tip of his pen a few times. As it moved easily and was basically only three or four sheets thick it wasn't likely there was a bomb in it… and as Storms couldn't be poisoned when aware of the risk, he picked it up to see what it was.

…apparently the Vindice were billing Verde and by consequence his patron/boss for 'turning evidence into an explosive device'.

The. *Fuck?*

Bjørn needed a raise. He wasn't paid to deal with this shit, nor was it in his contractual agreement with his patron. Above and beyond the line of duty.

Putting the letter, or bill, down with the envelope he made for his room. He had a kind of slush fund affair stuck in his closet from skimming off bribes or favors he did for others around the island that came from his Lady's influences and not his own skills. As it was more one of Viper's secondary safeguards against not having the required funds on hand for any aim than a habit of his own, he didn't greatly mind when Tatiana raided it for paying utilities or for helping her buy some replacement furniture she wanted more than what he had before they moved in together.

However, all withdrawals had mostly ceased since the nurse went back home for a year and he lacked any reason to dip into it once he had paid Tyr the Sword Emperor back for the loan.

As he semi-suspected, he had overstuffed the little metal money box some time ago and someone crammed a couple extra bars of precious metals on top.

Oh dear, he wondered who it was that tended to have random bars of precious metal on her and had an interest in his well-being or finances.

It was nice of her, somewhat… but not really necessary. He handled her money for her, and he paid himself a percentage of whatever was earned with his assistance. He could easily give himself a bonus or two if he wanted, but that she did think of him was appreciated.

Signing out the amount Verde needed to pay in order to not get an uncomfortable visit or two mostly cleared out the slush fund, which meant he could go back to stuffing it full again.

Flipping through the bound bundles of various denominations, euros and American dollars with some Italian Liras and an entire three of Soviet Ruble, he also grabbed his money calculator on his
If the Vindice charged a million in euros for accidentally seizing an improvised explosive device, well… Bjørn wasn't exactly sure if he wanted to know who else got billed like this. Probably larger syndicates that occasionally got annoyed by smaller ones to a Vindice-calling point, and their members might've gone overboard on whatever revenge before the Enforcers got called in.

Summing up a grand total of a million in mostly euros but some dollars on top to make up the rest, he really needed to keep better track of his slush fund but usually Tatiana wouldn't let it get that high, he put the money on top of the letter and envelope. As directed in the missive/bill, except far enough on to the table to clearly see both the bundle and anything below it.

Then he waited, staring at one spot as he sipped his apple juice.

Bjørn eventually ran out of juice, but nothing happened right away. No creeping Mist-feel, so it only probably wasn't Viper looking to scam some quick cash out of him… or any other Mist for that matter. One that would be aware a Mist trained him and the really very blatant greediness his finance tutor had.

An hour after he started watching and about when he started contemplating just snatching up the money up to pour himself another drink, the black envelope went darker and seemed to swallow both the bill and the money. Then a receipt was spat back out of the living shadow, the 'envelope' melting away before his eyes while radiating something that made all the hairs on his forearms stand on end.

…he was never mentioning this to anyone.

Gingerly picking up the receipt between a forefinger and thumb, he shuffled back to his room to put it with the other receipts he kept track of. While yeah someone could come across it and then ask him questions, if they could come up with a better explanation then the Lightning-Storm would love to hear it.

However, he was not telling Sonya that apparently the Vindice had billed her for Verde blowing something up on them. He didn't want to know, the whole thing was paid anyways, and frankly Bjørn could live with a mystery or two.

He added a hefty measure of vodka to his next glass of juice, just to be safe. Being drunk was a perfectly acceptable excuse for weird ass hallucinations, right?

(Sunday the 25th of October, 1970. Mafia Land.)

"Thanks for taking Alek for a couple days, Fong. The brat barely tolerates my Lackey as it is, I was a little afraid the idiot would risk the kid's last nerve by being his grumpy sulky self with me elsewhere."

"I have little objections to assisting with worthy causes." Fong allowed dryly, folding his unfettered arms into his sleeves as a slightly dyed tan off-white young animal hastened ahead beyond the leash's reach to reassure himself that he had not been abandoned. "However… I am going to need to charge you for the worth of six doors."

The thief already seated where she sent a message she'd be to take her dog back froze stock still on the somewhat abused looking bench, heaving a sigh when her animal companion decided to make up for her lack of movement by bathing the side of her face with his tongue. "Six of them? He's
gotten a bit industrious about that…"

"Once the immediate replacement before we even finished installation, likely an attempt to discourage us from keeping him in." Confirmed the Storm, amused by her exasperation as he took the implied offer of a seat next to her. "Your companion was not happy that first night."

"I'm kind of tempted to charge Kappel for it, that wasn't the plan when I asked you to do this."

"What did happen?" Not that he minded the delay, he enjoyed the company of loyal animals. Even if Alek was loyal only to his mistress, not whomever fed his greedy maw or provided for his care.

"He demanded I remain in observation while a few tests were run, since I didn't declare each and every one at the moment I got them." Sonya muttered sourly, using one hand to ruffle the slightly stiffening ruff on her dog and needed her other to keep his paws firmly planted on the cobblestone down this side alley halfway between their respective domiciles… even as the creature attempted to finish licking her face. "And while I understand why, more counting risks and sourcing complications before they start than just to annoy me, it still took a while for the labs to get back to us. Mainly because there's a surfeit of Lightnings that took over the entire damn thing recently, and they're not all that concerned with getting results to places quickly so long as it's accurate to the best of their abilities. And they're new to running lab tests, so it's taking even longer."

Fong raised a sleeve to cover his lower face for a moment, beating back the laugh that threatened to slip past his teeth by willpower alone. "Hmm… how shocking."

"Ha ha." Deadpanned the slim Russian flatly, shooting him an exasperated look. "We might've known they were going to pull this shit, but why the fuck did it have to be now?"

"You knew they would be overrunning the hospital?" He prodded curiously, accepting the semi-suspicious eyeing as his due for asking regardless.

Having been to the hospital a few times, although not recently admittedly, he was aware of the general age-range of the Soviet medical students dotting around the facility. Her elder sister was the oldest of them, to a painfully young mortician in the basement and even up to Tatiana's fellow nurses not one of them was beyond the age of twenty yet.

Then again, they both were not all that much older…

She huffed sourly as she returned most of her attention to soothing her animal companion's distress with both hands. "I am still the legal guardian on record for a lot of the under aged Flame users in the hospital, as I was still the head of the Mafia Flame Academy of Moscow when they all arrived. The Lightning contingent was the third or fourth group to be sent in, and they eventually realized they had been stuck in roles that were more general than medical after a while. Well obviously, a bunch of mercurial-tempered kids getting scorned like that when they so graciously offered their abilities to be made use of?"

Alek poked his nose into Sonya's stomach, paused and inhaled strongly with a purpose, then didn't bother to turn his snout away to sneeze. Fong curiously watched as the animal checked over his mistress in several locations, only licking slowly at her left hip rather than simply move on, while the Cloud disgustedly dealt with the snot blown over her chest.

…interesting. "I did have a reason to accept your request, if you would humor me."

"Aside the money and getting to play with my dog?"

"Aside that, yes." Utterly unconcerned by the slowly sharpening edge of suspicion from the thief
seated next to him, again entirely his due for not making it clear he had motives when she asked him to watch her companion, Fong placed the planks of wood making up this rough bench solidly against his spine and glanced both ways down the street to see who was about right now and who had too much interest for a pair of people trading a dog between them. "I am unsure if you were aware, but I have recently been taking assassination contracts as offered by the island's relevant guildhall."

"...okay?"

"I am not very good at tracking a person from rumors alone or from a single sighting." Confessed the Storm easily, giving a bland smile at the utterly exasperated look he was being pinned by from her and her dog for taking her attention away from petting him. "I have restricted myself to only contracts where a known local haunt is recorded for whomever I am to be hunting, but... the restriction takes entirely too many options out of my search for something to do. New martial arts styles are becoming harder to come across... so this deficiency in my skill set has become pressing to solve."

Sonya contemplated a fair number of answers, if how long she took to reply was any indication. As Fong would prefer pure advice he could use instead of more personal opinions on the pitfall he was sidestepping until he could obtain the relevant skill, he did not mind waiting out her preoccupation.

"It's not too much different, you just need more time to deal with both false leads and the occasional rumor gathering bribe or three." Allowed the thief, who did have to track selected individuals from a known or not known locale back to their hideouts in order to steal back trinkets or blackmail materials. Fong had checked to be sure she might have advice for him before posing the question to her. "Not something I'd suggest learning on the fly, mind you. Half of it is based on assumptions and how long it took you to do it previously and half is the required stalking of people. But yeah, my dad ensured I knew how to do it before I ever left home. I take it you'd like the lessons?"

"I will be comparing to other suggestions, I have a wealth of them, but yes."

She blinked slowly at him, one hand buried into the dog's chest fur to keep him settled between her boots and not straining to jump on her as she had apparently attempted to discourage. "If three people say one thing and one other says another, who do you trust?"

"...the substantiated opinion?"

"And if that one paid off the other three in order to lead you into a trap using a compromised information line and ensured you were looking the wrong way at him instead of the others? How about someone learning you asking of foreign sources, and don't like that at all? Or just someone that plain doesn't like you?"

The very rudimentary assassin in the making thought about that. It didn't entirely apply... he had her on one hand and a handful of others from the same organization. Then again, Fong was sure he might've stepped on another's toes here or there due to how bored a lot of them were waiting out police investigations or waiting for another Triad to lose interest in killing them.

"My dad calls it the 'devil's fallacy', when you need to search for more information but you can't entirely use trusted sources for it. Where should prudent suspicion stop and where should it begin?" Sonya scrubbed down Alek's back with both hands, smiling faintly for the animal's absolutely blissful if mismatched expression of adoration aimed up at her for doing it. "I'm not sure about your situation, thieves and assassins need to hunt different sorts for different reasons after all, so I might be very wrong in assuming anything about why you're asking me for help. But if you want more information than I might recall, I'd really rather you bug my dad for it instead of people that could or might want you removed for any reason. If only so I don't have to tell two specific
individuals that you trusted the wrong man. Arseniy will ask you to do him a small favor or two, probably shit he can't immediately get to as mom's main guardsman for the school, but as you're one of mine and having an assassin as a friend isn't a half-bad idea... he'll be professional about it."

…Fong was semi-sure Sonya's father was suspicious of him. Then again, the man had two daughters of exotic coloring and of appreciable feminine beauty. He was likely suspicious of all males within fifty meters of both, regardless of how grown or competent the women were in combat themselves.

Although… from what she had to say about the subject of her parents, they were formal instructors of various criminal skills. The vor had, equally as she did, ducked another assassin more trained than the Storm several times if all Liqin had to say on the subject was true. In order to do so one had to know the methods another would use to track their very presence, and somehow the massive man managed it in their own backyard.

Without the more senior assassin at hand, who had given him some pointers when he started taking assassination-orientated Mafia Land contracts… Fong was a little at a loss on how to get some general and professional advice. While he was not sure about going that far out of his way for personal instruction he could probably trust more than anything he asked of the others lingering on the island for various reasons, it was an option.

An option that held little risk even if would require more effort.

"I will keep such an offer in mind."

It was a proven source of information, offered by someone that would not have intentions of his harm in either physical or reputation-wise aims, and while out of his way it was exactly what he asked of her. If Fong could not satisfy his questions on Mafia Land, he could investigate any contracts that might take him to the Soviet Union.

Sonya shot him a dry look before gathering her animal companion's leash to leave, and he merely nodded in acceptance.

Odds were that he was going to take her offer, yes. There was still a slight possibility he could find something more local he could also trust… not likely, but it was possible.

"Oh... and my mom wants to meet you. So if you go, say hi to her for me."

…ah. Oh dear.

(Friday the 30th of October, 1970. Sestri Levante Comprehensive School, Sestri Levante, Metropolitan City of Genoa, Italian Republic.)

Carefully extracting himself from general notice after the school day was over wasn't too tricky, most everyone else were either headed off to whichever after school club they belonged to or vacating the grounds as fast as possible. It was the start of the weekend, not two months into the school year, and most generally had better things to do than gape at the newcomers however exotic.

Larion, despite being one of the two Russian foreign students in the whole region and the third foreign student in the entire school, found little trouble on his way to meet up with the others as per usual. There was the expected watching his movements around someone else's 'territory', although he highly doubted his classmates consciously realized they were doing that, but that was dropping off more and more the longer he and Usov attended without obviously doing anything 'wrong'.
Then again, Shamal and Usov had an invested reason to assist his unnoticed exit. Going noticed but not watched being easier today wasn't entirely too unexpected after a moment of thought.

What wasn't the routine they established early on to allow the school population to get used to and basically ignore them the quickest was Larion meeting up with Mingxia and the two younger Mists on the roof of the school building instead of heading off to the train station together.

With the Mirror Lady already there, in the hours past noon but well before dusk when she preferred to wake for a day. Still, she was neatly put together and not cradling her nightmare of a pet spider… so perhaps she had gotten enough rest with a bit of forethought.

Her presence did give the younger Mist's claims of a job set by his godmother more credence, not that he really doubted the news but that Anna fully believed it made it less and less likely to be just a claim.

…not that he had come to any kind of misfortune from anything Shamal had informed him of so far. Neither had Mingxia, for that matter. The younger Rain just… couldn't bring himself to trust the other kid all that much.

He didn't trust a damn word Usov claimed either, but he had the occasionally uncomfortable and merely embarrassing events behind that hesitance back when the Moscow Rains were being tested by the others as they left their little enclosed spaces. He did trust Anna's words, but that was only due to her obvious pleasure in carrying out Sonya's orders to the point she was always reliable in that.

Apparently whatever task they had been charged by and some detail had been discussed while his attention was elsewhere, meaning when the Rain tuned back in the basics had been covered and the topic now was how to set up a counter-spying effort against the police currently spying on them.

"I don't quite see why," the Mirror Lady observed softly to the group, idly caressing her hand mirror while checking on whatever it was tuned to show her, "I keep them out and ignorant."

"That's kind of the problem." Shamal offered, somehow reassuringly to the teenager that was still taller than all of them despite not being all that tall for a woman. "It's noticeable, because no one else has as tight of security. Not even the famigilas around here keep the police out of everything. While we're not doing anything they'd dislike, mainly… but there's also the fact we're not exactly anything they'd like either. Unrelated family groups don't tend to live in the same square footage around here… even if it is a castle."

The brunette pursed her lips, slanting a glance at both Usov's grinning visage and Larion himself. "If we treat it like being glanced over by the KGB, neither Mrs. Zinaida nor Mrs. Ruslana will be comforted. In fact, that would cause both women to remain closeted away in the castle's grounds…"

"Which would entirely fail to fulfill mamma's request to buy her time to do what she has to before she can come back home and deal with it then." He agreed absently, crossing thin arms over his chest and giving a nod as if to finalize his agreement.

"…why not give them what they want?" Larion asked of them all, a bit confused on how this was an issue entirely. "Mom and Usov's mom don't like they're sneaking around instead of asking upfront, so tell them that and ask they come up to the castle to ask Adrik whatever."

"If your suggestion is to sell out Cesare-"

"Stop being stupid, Shamal. Of course we're not giving them our second-best defense aside Miss Bazanova. Who's, you know, not home to be a defense. But they're not doing what they need to for
whatever reason, which is stressing mom out as they take so long… so let's just get the whole thing started so we know what they're going to try. The unknown is worse than what you know."

"…why are they looking for Mafioso Cesare?" Mingxia asked of Anna over his head while he and Shamal glared at each other.

"Mostly due to coincidence." Ussov interjected blandly before the older teen could, taking obvious and pointed enjoyment out of the petty bickering to the point it wasn't nearly as satisfying to do so Larion stopped pulling faces. "They are under the very likely suspicion one of their contact has come to an un-mourned and fitting end. Cesare is the closest with the reputation and history of suspicious behavior to guess being capable of willful murder in the exact area their contact was sent to. That he did it is entirely immaterial right now, until they gain some proof."

"Yes, but." Continued the Chinese girl slowly. "There are more assassins to the north of us, who visit. Vongola-aligned assassins. Up until recently one high-profile one came by frequently. We are not, excuse me Master Cesare is not, the only possibility. While I do not doubt we will still obtain an observer or two, there is no basis for the police to try and take our chef into custody."

"Um… that's… an interesting point. Assuming, of course, Cesare's history with law enforcement doesn't weigh against reasonable doubt in the minds of our uninvited watchers. It might not have ever been proven, but that many deaths happening near or around him is all sorts of suggestive." Glancing back to the Mirror Lady, Shamal unfolded his arms and spread his hands. "The main issue is the police's expectations might poison them against the obvious realities, Mingxia, but it's a good point… we can spread that to the village if things get said."

Larion had to agree, honestly. "I've never been all that impressed with the intelligence of patrolling police officers… not even the couple we've seen near our new home."

"They're not supposed to be smart, patrolling and dealing with the same petty crime over and over is basically routine drudge work for police officers. Smart police officers will get bored and restless with the entirely too obvious civilian-crime, whereas those with… let us say limited creativity, would be more ideal for basic police work and willing to do such patrols for years more than another." Flipping her mirror over repeatedly in something that might be absent habit or linked to her doing something with her Mist Flames, the Mirror Lady glanced between each of them. "Then the plan seems to be sowing discord and doubt, at least for the short-term?"

"Okay, question. If the police being nearby just watching us is disturbing mom and the others… why don't we just say so?"

While Shamal was about to snap something sarcastic and probably mean, Larion suddenly came to the pointed and intent attentions of his fellow Mists. A weirdly calculating Ussov glanced at the wickedly smirking Anna, and then the both turned to their 'native expert' who only blinked at the same arresting sensation of being inspected by oddly acting Mists.

"Shamal… how well will an accusation of behaving comparatively to or worse than their Soviet Union counterparts go over with our little spies?"

"Especially," chipped in Ussov before Shamal could answer the Mirror Lady's question. "if we get our little blunt ball of hard logic over here to deliver it as a matter of fact?"

Mingxia slid away from him slowly, Larion wasn't that distracted to not notice. So much for Rain solidarity…

"Probably not well." The only Italian native in their little knot reluctantly gave in with, then
surprisingly continuing with a different suggestion. "Actually, it might be best to explain our Beast Mistress' issues with being under this kind of suspicion to Father Castiglione first. She's missed Mass due to being unable to trust in the community she's part of now, because of them trying to be either cautious about things or unwilling to be straightforward. Our pastor is someone they have to respect the word of, rather than just some brat from Moscow with opinions on them."

…trust Shamal to give any help, no matter how reluctantly, in the most backwards method possible.

"If we invite Father Castiglione up to the castle to see for himself, and for mom to explain it to him, might do more for our position than our explaining for them." Threw in the former head of the Soviet Mists thoughtfully, as if it wasn't on the heels of suggesting the Russian Rain doing it alone. "Which might actually be something he's been angling for since Dama left us, so I know he'll agree instantly."

Larion blinked slowly. "Why…?"

"Because he's a very dutiful fussy hen," Usov explained for him while simultaneously ignoring Shamal's disgusted look for the summery, "he feels there are more Christians in need of spiritual guidance in our castle… and while he's right Scruffy needs to take that step for himself instead of be found out a 'delinquent' Christian. What probably doesn't help is that Sifu Yaozu and Miss Mingxia here aren't Catholic have reached the village's rumor mills, or more to the point some of the old man's recent business is Catholics trying to get a measure of someone so unapologetically not Catholic so a different measure of who they are as a person can be obtained instead of just another 'dutiful church-goer'."

"Won't that still force their hands into actually doing something or making an accusation?" Mingxia wondered aloud, apparently not entirely comfortable with the religious talk like her fellow Rain but with more an aim to get the conversation back on track than entirely avoid the topic. "Furthermore, asking a pastor to take on part of the task would expose us a little more to an arguable 'outsider'… would he try to take advantage of such an invitation if he felt it in someone's best interests?"

"Miss Bazanova only asked for time, right?" Larion chimed onto her words when the Mists each looked mildly exasperated instead of thoughtful at the interruption. "I really don't have much to say against involving Father Castiglione in anything, but we probably need to avoid forcing the polices' hands against Cesare. But… maybe we should get Usov's mom to the pastor instead of the other way around. Just to be safe."

The son of the woman in question made a sour grimace, a bit darker than the expressions that normally crossed his face. He warily watched his classmate's features, as the Mist mulled something over internally without bringing it into the current topic of what benefits or drawbacks starting to give out invitations to visit them without Miss Bazanova's permission might result in.

Larion wasn't afraid of Usov, no more than any Rain would be wary of a Mist they worked with frequently would be. What he was… was aware no Mist ever had to obey conventional things like 'growing up naturally' or 'reality verse expectations'.

He was fully aware the other was not another child in anything but the physical, but not afraid. If anything, Usov's mentality was around the Mirror Lady's in maturity and while he could play at being younger than he was it wasn't a natural state for him. He was respecting the desire of not only his parents but their boss in remaining physically his real age… but he hadn't always.

Some things, once done, could not be taken back. Learning something, and obtaining the maturity to comprehend the subjects, was one of those permanent things Usov couldn't always hide behind his slightly creepy habits.
Even taking Hawk's situation into account, removing the associated memories would not remove the base understanding of situations or concepts from the human mind without additional tinkering.

Which he hoped Usov hadn't done.

"Well then..." Mingxia clasped her hands together before her, which Larion was not fooled by because his fellow Rain had a pragmatic streak in her he hadn't expected even after being an expert on Rain Flame in Moscow teaching her for a stint. "Who is then going to inform Master Cesare that this needs to happen, and why?"

Anna smiled politely at the younger girl, right before disappearing from any and every method of perception. Which was at least a bit better than Shamal and Usov, the two of them were just flat out gone when the Rains looked to them next.

The older girl looked at him next.

"I barely know the guy, mom doesn't leave me alone with him." Likely for a very good reason, but there it was.

"...would he realize we are doing such mainly on his behalf?"

"I... kind of doubt it." Larion turned to the stairwell they used to get up here, hoping the Mists were just hanging around in some hard to see perspective instead of completely removed. Otherwise a few of the faculty would have some pressing questions for why the two Rains had been on the roof. "From the sounds of it, one of the main differences between vory and Mafiosi is the whole getting arrested and prison time commitment requirement. Cesare's probably used to separating himself from whatever he's done by only increments to stay out of jail before he moves on to greener pastures... but what someone on his own can get away with is worlds apart from what someone in a known territory has to do."

Mingxia picked at her nails, slowly following him. "I... suppose. Perhaps that is something else to leave to Miss Sonya?"

"He'd probably appreciate it more coming from another grown adult than a bunch of brats." The thief they followed might have more to say as well, or at least practical critiques on how differently one had to guard a stationary headquarters against a temporary one. "It might also be she wants to have that conversation herself with the man, that's why she didn't ask Shamal to arrange that with Adrik either."

"That is a very good point."

...she didn't have to sound so surprised over it. He spent several months getting her up to speed on Rain-centric habits and how not to assume everyone one spoke to would be equally as calm about things, mainly by taking into account obvious details like social standing and the like in who you could be Rain-blunt about issues with and who wouldn't take it as well, so she should know full well he wasn't merely suggesting it to get out of being the one to do it.

He shot her a look while he held the roof access door open, she smirked impishly as she passed him.

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(Tuesday the 3rd of November, 1970. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

With any other combination of details, this would be routine. Almost.

Alvah Pirbright, the arguable 'master' of one of the guildhalls of Mafia Land, didn't necessarily
adhere to 'rules' and 'routine'. He wouldn't have survived if he had.

Others could call him gutless and spineless all they wished. The fact of the matter was he had lived to see his middle age and most others didn't speak for itself.

Yes, his services could be bought for the right price. All those that lived or worked on Body Avenue could be so swayed, everyone was comfortable knowing he had his price just like everyone else.

When a member of one guildhall looked for another to handle a secondary objective to one of their contracts it was not unusual to then contract a specific member of another guild for assistance. One such contract was in fact offered… but refused as the assassin wished to speak with a thief before offering any such thing.

Pirbright rubbed at his forehead as one of RamÃrez's assassins, one of the newer ones to boot, cheerfully but implacably made a fool out of every member of his staff running around looking for one of his more surprisingly long-standing thieves. That the young Triad tough couldn't find her spoke well of their layout at least, being as the woman he was looking for was picking her contracts for the rest of the year out with her Lackey in a secure room provided to review such sensitive information in.

Then again, the assassins' own guildhall went down rather than up.

Five years ago, this would have been simple. He'd just order security to utilize lethal means to chase and keep the boy out. Now, with Dying Will Flame users popping out of the seeming woodwork all over and taking issue with one's utterly prudent concern for their varied and explosive natures, you couldn't ever be that sure lethal resorts would stick.

He heard about the gunshot wounds not doing a damn thing in slowing down Mafia Land's Cloud, thank you very much. Demir ensured he was fully informed on that respect, and for free too the cheap bastard. It had been all over the island in a matter of hours, it earned the master of the info brokers absolutely nothing to ensure he had fifteen minutes less peace of mind than anyone else who hadn't been there for the incident had.

Aside a laugh or three, the unmitigated asshole.

"Invite our… guest to my office." Pirbright exasperatedly ordered of the branch of their security that oversaw thief-related needs, even more aggravated by the Italian's bracing inhale before doing as ordered.

They just had to replace the head of every branch, didn't they?

Nominally, the running of the island wasn't interrupted all that much. Past a certain level, that was. Those that 'owned' the island rarely if ever bothered themselves with anything on it, instead getting a hefty chunk of all proceeds after all the bills were paid and the mechanical deathtrap he called home was maintained or upgraded as per their responsibilities to upkeep went. Occasionally a new building or complex was built, some feature of the island was rearranged to suit a need, a new business opened up… all that was taken care of without much input from anyone actually living here.

The only exception had ever been that Turkish branch that oversaw day to day protection of the island's many services, and one out of five hands mainly off masters had been rather nice.

Then the CEDEF took over and replaced all the 'key' personnel with their own people. Not the grunts, just the ones ten or more grunts reported to.

Expected, but disruptive. Especially for those that had established understandings with their arguable
'guards' or for those bribes already paid.

Pirbright had known and worked with Ertek Sabanci nearly from the start of this iteration of Mafia Land, they had a gentleman's understanding about how and why any interference would happen and the Turkish thug therefore was never present to be identified unless it was payday when all the clerks checked in as well. This middle-aged paper pusher he had been replaced with was an unknown sort, taking over the minor details Pirbright had a secretary for and a loyalty that went beyond his current precarious position.

He also showed up to work every, *God*, damned, *day.*

The thieves of Mafia Land didn't obey him and kept everything secret because they *respected* him, they did so on the understanding that he would *report them* as security breeches to be dealt with if they didn't obey his rules.

The *moment* one of them realized they had to obey Pirbright about how they handled Mafia Land contracts was only because of *that* idiot… someone would murder him just as someone murdered the *previous* head of Mafia Land's security *and* the not so lamented head of the hitman's guildhall.

Everyone knew full well who murdered the former head of the Vongola's CEDEF, she left quite the calling card and that death had been appropriately made clear to be a last resort if an objectionable habit to one of her underaged charges was not changed as requested. No one knew who murdered Quyền Cường, though the man was flaky and greasy enough no one was remotely surprised it finally happened.

Slapping the accounting books for this financial quarter closed, his real only 'use' aside being a figurehead to be wary of was to ensure his greedy thieves didn't skim more off the top than appropriate, Pirbright placed them in the drawer for later then assumed an appropriately grave expression for his guest.

Then he waited.

…and waited some more.

When the loose assassin was *finally* redirected to his office, on the top floor of the building, the utterly affable expression aimed at him was galling in an entirely unique way.

"I seem to have been turned around a little." Sông Fong, Triad assassin and martial arts master that didn't remotely eclipse the 'Storm Flame user who can fight a Cloud Flame user to a standstill' admitted without a trace of sheepishness to his tone. "Forgive my intrusion, would you perhaps know where Sonya is?"

No one passed on a warning that something that might tick off the island's Cloud had occurred, then again Flame users were not a very chatty fraction of the human race. It was entirely possible that wasn't *why* the boy was here invading his guildhall… and then again it *might be*, being unable to tell was vastly annoying.

"Is there a *particular* reason why I should tell you?"

"Politeness." Suggested the Triad assassin pleasantly, as if he wasn't invading the hall of a trade he was not contracted for. "I have asked nicely…"

…was there a 'not' nice way for him to ask?

Regardless, Pirbright was not interested in forcing the issue. He didn't really have much power
outside what leeway the guildhalls were set up to give him, and the guildhalls only worked because they were convenient. Once one of the two stopped being relevant, he could likely measure his remaining life in days if not hours for the indignity of fooling various criminals into behaving rules they didn't have to obey.

Furthermore, his entire job description was boiled down to 'earn as much money as possible via the jobs given to Mafia Land for any with the skill to do using the loose workforce available'. He concerned himself with contracts suited for thieves because that is what his headquarters was inevitably tasked to do when the volume built up enough to necessitate separate locations for certain types.

Besides which, this was not the first instance of an assassin or hitman wandering into the thieves' guildhall and vice versa.

"Miss Bazanova is speaking with her Lackey in a meeting room. You will wait like a civilized gentleman, Master Sōng, for her to finish her business. Yes?" The utterly guileless smile he received in return was not encouraging of any obedience.

The fact the younger man immediately offered a cash bribe without so much as twitching a facial muscle to change his expression was much easier to swallow.

"…follow me." He may have to split the bribe with the young woman, but at least this would enable him to handwave blame from himself for doing nothing to the young assassin for the insistence.

And thusly, no one would know he literally could not prevent this incident from happening. For now.
Chapter 36

(Saturday the 7th of November, 1970. Tuguegarao City, Province of Cagayán, Republic of the Philippines.)

"So… who is she?" Sonya inquired curiously, stretched out on a rafter and checking over those contained in the main warehouse floor below.

"She is Duyi Nuan, my Mountain Master's favorite niece." Fong very reluctantly provided for her, edging just a small measure backwards to ensure the thief was between him and a familiar individual below.

The blonde hummed tunelessly while ignoring his movements. "…because she's his only niece, or because he plays favorites?"

"The former."

She seemed to accept that at face value, though he had no idea how much weight she was giving his claims as one of the man's agents. Frankly Fong was more concerned with avoiding Destina Catubig's general line of sight to care much for how seriously she was taking him.

If the knife-fighter below happened to look up, he did not wish to be the first one she saw.

Admittedly, the Storm had not spoken to Destina since that misunderstanding happened in front of his sister two years ago. He honestly had not realized she had been propositioning him in… a very subtle way, Mingxia realizing Destina had more personal reasons for 'happening' to be close by so often before him had been a little embarrassing.

…well, a lot embarrassing. Fong might've been avoiding her, and he would not be surprised if she realized such.

If she had or had not realized why he had been scarce in previous haunts he used to frequent, for it did coincide with his 'exile' to Mafia Land and therefore she might not have guessed why he had not passed on word or spoken to her himself in some time, was immaterial right now. She had likely participated in this kidnapping, he could not see another reason for her presence at all otherwise. That pitted them against one another… he just hoped he would not have to confront her in the middle of something as chaotic as a fight.

Fong recently realized while he could tolerate embarrassment to an extent, he had an upper limit to his forbearances.

He slanted a look at the woman who, with her sister, featured heavily in his recent realizations… and then glanced away quickly.

She was carefully and methodically loosening her muscle groups while moving as little as she could get away with.

Understandable as an action to take, and she had not complained about the two… almost three hours they had wasted on wooden beams waiting for an opening they could use to extract his Mountain Master's niece. As it was, it seemed as if they would not be able to liberate the poor woman tonight and hence her preparation to wait longer without cramping or stiffening was prudent.

…the slow stretches and contortions could be less suggestive.
No, he was not imagining things. There was little else one could assume from what use being able to put one ankle behind your own head was to anyone, aside… flexibility?

Perhaps it enabled Sonya's acrobatic-based fighting style?

Being able to go from an axle kick to a mule kick and back again as she feinted around another's strike in favor of a more advantageous move only to drop it in the next second for yet another strike was a very big key to how the thief fought, adaptability and being able to transition from an aggressive advance to a complete evasion as she felt needed contributed to how difficult of an opponent she could be.

Obviously her physical frame and flexibility were the hard limits in her ability to bend around strikes in her direction, as well as how much stress her joints could endure and how much strength she could exert in her muscles to reverse momentum in a moment… but Fong still could not see what she would need the ability to place her ankle behind her head for.

So he asked.

"Circus high-wire acts. I learned how to do a flip in a traveling Russian circus after all." Sonya pointed out practically, pausing in her leg-stretches to consider something while sitting upright. "I occasionally go back… and Jiayi's going to nag at me again for not getting more practice in since last summer. Speaking of last summer..."

"...ah?"

"Mingxia isn't very good making use of unstructured time without help. It wasn't me who figured it out, one of the women that emigrated with me to Italy did, but she does so much better with a task or aim to work for than relaxing or enjoying her downtime."

He honestly had not noticed anything like that. When he had the time, he could not linger all that long with his little sister beyond a stolen minute here or there. Then again, he had been aware of her longer-term plans

Sonya moved on to limbering up her arms, starting with her fingers. "Show up randomly, for random amounts of time. I don't think there's anything I can do for the girl, but if you can teach her how to enjoy a break here or there without actually bringing it up she'll live healthier."

…Fong would be pleased to assist. Unfortunately, before he could convey such to her the wide rolling doors leading from the warehouse interior to the loading dock outside clattered open.

Revealing at least twenty new men, and one middle-aged individual in a crinkled linen suit swaggering into the darkening building. Given the lack of reaction by any but young Nuan, yet more of those involved in her kidnapping all in one place when they didn't want them.

Instead, he rose to his feet while remaining balanced on the rafter beam and keeping his profile minimized just in case of an errant glance upward. "I believe we have run out of time."

"...I'll snatch the girl and get her out of here." Putting motion to her words, suddenly the thief was upside down and scaling along the wooden beam without too much difficulty.

That left taking on the newcomers and those already present, or at least distracting them for Sonya to save the kidnapped young woman and get them both away without too much opposition.

Fong started positioning himself to take out Destina the Pilipino knife-fighter first and silently. He would knock her out with a sharp blow to the back of her head instead of aim to kill, because he
really didn't hold any ill-will to her knowing full well she was mercenary in nature and this was likely just business to her instead of personal.

He just… didn't want to have a personal conversation in the middle of her trying to take his head off or aiming for his extremities while he was dealing with her nominal allies.

It just wasn't professional.

Glancing over the dark rafters of the warehouse, he squinted through the gloom to ensure Sonya was in position to move the moment he started everything. It took the woman waving a hand for him to spot her, due to how murky everything above the level where the lamps had been installed was after nightfall.

Then the thief started descending a sheer stack of crates awaiting a ship using nothing but the tips of her fingers and the toes of her boots. Headfirst. Silently. Down a line between crates no one was positioned to clearly spy down and spot her.

…very well then.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 7th of November, 1970 continued. A hostel, Tuguegarao City, Province of Cagayán, Republic of the Philippines.)

Little Miss Nuan leaned back slightly, just to give Sonya the most unimpressed flat look she had ever been on the receiving end of in either lifetime once they were arguably out of 'public' spaces.

"…I'll explain later." She deflected sourly, carefully nudging Alek away from sniffing the girl's bloody feet she hadn't noticed until in range to 'steal' the girl back from that brawl Fong started.

There wasn't really any way to 'explain' how a Chinese man could toss a handful of Storm Flames shaped like dragon heads at people without getting into detail Zhōng might not appreciate his niece getting, nor just why the entire warehouse district suddenly had to be evacuated so her carrying around a girl with bloody feet wasn't actually the most notable thing going on in the streets. The blurry red haze glowing over that section of the city was also kind of hard to explain to a 'civilian' girl, not to mention it was a little tricky to explain how she could cut ropes holding her arms behind her back and tethered to the floor without a knife in hand and leap across buildings and streets without issue with a girl in her arms.

Then again, neither she nor Fong had realized the group that burst in the last second had other Flame users in there. Two Rains, another Storm, three Suns, and a Lightning mixed in with the more baseline-human men so Fong was forced to treat them with equal force they came at him with.

Bonus, the use of Dying Will Flames were a showy eyecatcher. No one noticed Sonya sneaking Nuan out of that shitshow once Fong turned up the heat, even if she noticed way too much.

Setting the girl on one of the four beds this hostel room the Triad Storm got them, Sonya fetched out her medical supplies and took stock of the girl's feet. "…where are your shoes?"

"I was taken from my home, my house slippers disintegrated the second day." Nuan pointed out a bit bitterly while inspecting the rope burns on her forearms, but then again that was entirely understandable.

The thief would murder anyone trying to get her to walk around without her boots on her own damn feet. "This might hurt worse, then. I need to ensure none of it or any road-dust is left in these
wounds, so that means hydrogen peroxide and prodding the soles of your feet to be sure they're clean before I wrap them up."

The young woman, who was probably near or close to Sonya's own age range of about twenty, nodded grimly and visibly braced herself for the ordeal.

She had never had to treat her feet for foreign materials before, Storm Flames were good for keeping her flesh and body somewhat sterile depending on some factors. That benefited the girl absolutely nothing, so she had to treat her injuries the old-fashioned way.

A makeup brush for blush and a pair of tweezers were liberally and vigorously scrubbed down with soap and water she flash-boiled clean, flatly ignoring the second raised eyebrow aimed in her direction, before she started gingerly treating the girl's feet while also trying to keep her dog's nose out of the small cap full of hydrogen peroxide she kept needing to refresh periodically.

Alek was determinedly trying to snort it before she could pour it over the next cleaned rent in her feet, the stupid twit. Nuan was avidly focusing on her fluffy dumb beast's antics instead of flinching at every touch, so the thief didn't firmly shove the dog away so he'd know it was something doggies should not get into and she didn't appreciate his curiosity… but keeping his fucking fur out of the injuries was added to her inspection as consequence.

It took entirely too long and she was getting a bit worried that Fong hadn't shown up to hang about like the useless lump he really was, so Sonya hastily dug out the white and brass leather boots she hadn't had the opportunity to wear yet and a pair of her own socks to shove on the woman's injured feet to protect them from her dumbass dog and any reasonable need to walk for a short while. "Stay inside. The dog's got better senses than you, if he growls don't open the damn door and if he's wagging his tail and basically acting excited it's just me coming back to take you home. I need to go make sure the other guy with me isn't dead in a ditch somewhere."

"Then you'll explain all this… fire-stuff?" Asked the woman mildly curiously, not even flinching when the thief tightened the laces as much as she dared to keep her sock-covered bandages well protected from dumb animals or any attempts of taking care of basic needs.

"We'll have an uncomfortably long time getting you back to Hong Kong for that." Promised the thief dryly, double-checking she had locked the thin wooden door that wouldn't deter anyone intent on getting in but at least would buy two seconds. "Stay off your feet if you can, if you can't ensure you have something to grab nearby. There's more water and snacks in my pack if you need it, go slow at first and yes you can feed them to the furry brat named Alek to bribe him into petting range. I shouldn't be much longer than twice the time it took me to get you here."

Nuan nodded once, more interested in the vine-pattern her cordwainer put into the white leather boots and sitting neatly contained on the bed instead of the animal antics now or the possibility of food and water.

Sonya left her and her suddenly depressed dog to it, leaving via the window and generally aiming for the apparent wildfire that had started in the general area she left Fong in.

That had grown. Was still growing, and apparently necessitated a state of emergency given the abandoned streets and the few uniformed people running around with either empty or full buckets of sloshing water.

…welp, good news was she was mostly sure Fong was still alive.

Probably.
The bad?

Sonya was not remotely sure how to explain that red haze and burning warehouse district to the civilians good enough no one would question it. It had spread rather far for a natural fire since she last checked, and from the rooftops on her way into the inferno she can see that clearly. Especially against the backdrop of a dark early evening sky, the blood-red lit smoke lazily spiraling up was incredibly eye-catching.

Then there was the heat. A nearly physical wall of way-too-hot smacked her in the face before she got within two streets of where she left Fong, and it stalled the Storm-Cloud out for a full second. Which she needed to readjust her own use of Flames, generating her own heat just to add to what was in the air already just so she could fucking breathe.

Her arms were suddenly covered in pale red-purple glass scales when she next caught sight of her own limbs and, from the feel of it, there were full grown if greener scales armoring her legs under her jeans too. It provided a little bit of protection from the heat, so she didn't remotely mind it was becoming an automatic reaction.

It helped a tiny bit as she investigated the burning ruin of the warehouse she had been sitting in unburned and fully intact less than an hour ago to figure out where to go next. Even with her own Storm Flames pulled up and almost coating her fingers, everything was entirely too hot and dusty to touch with her own hands. The crumbling as she touched what Fong hadn't overwhelmed with Disintegration to completely vanish something threw up a lot of burning-hot fragments everywhere, and seemingly especially when she was checking the people-shaped shadows to account for everyone she saw.

Obviously, she came up short. Surprisingly, for more than just Fong.

About fifteen people survived whatever it was that made the Triad Storm pull out all the stops and then risk such a visible alternative, not only that other woman he apparently knew on sight but most of those that arrived after the two of them.

With a general idea of what was ahead, Sonya triangulated where Fong probably was by where the hottest part of the visible red fire was reflected and headed off in that direction.

In a dusty, hot, weirdly gloomy if brightly lit in red shades streets with disintegrated buildings in various stages of destruction. It was weird. Like walking down an abandoned ruin of a town caught in the last moment of an apocalypse-level bombing.

It wasn't silent either, which provided an even eerier detail to get creeped out by, as actual fires generated by the heat crackled and buildings finished collapsing inwards or outwards with a varying levels of crashing noises depending on the levels of damage inflicted on them.

The thief found the only woman from that group quickly enough, for a completely baseline-human she had gotten somewhat far into the 'inferno-zone' before something made her take shelter between three still partially standing walls. She had all her metals, from knives to her jewelry to even a couple coins, discarded a distance away from her and was curled up in a ball only a millimeter away from the mainly wooden walls. Blisters were already forming on her arm protecting her face, but other than that and a few bruises she was relatively untouched.

Fong had to specifically leave her alive for her to be here, mainly uninjured and probably only suffering a heat stroke and dehydration aside the burns.

Sonya hesitated, because frankly she was doing a shit ton on the asshole's behalf as it was… but
grabbed the woman anyways to pull her out of there. The woman didn't even fight, much. After she got a good feel of her always lukewarm scale armor she practically melted against it the best she could even if that fouled up the Russian's hold on her person and made it difficult to walk.

Octopus-hands didn't stop rubbing herself on the armor even when they left the almost physical wall of heat behind, and by the time she spotted whatever passed as emergency services out here Sonya was entirely too happy to shove her off into the hands of someone else.

Escaping the group of rag-tag firefighters and local men easily by not speaking the local variant of Filipino they shouted at her, the thief hastily retraced her steps until she found the abandoned half-melted machetes and jewelry pile and continued from there.

She wandered past one Rain rather desperately trying to Tranquilize the ambient heat, rather poorly at that, and a couple other local Flame users that weren't Storms either trying to get further in to do something about the effects of a highly pissed off or excited Storm or just hunkering down at certain points. With various levels of skill and effectiveness, but the Rain guy had the best idea… just not the power to get it done.

There were a few more local Flame users the closer she thought she got, the Storms had gotten the closest of them all, but given the distribution of space between them and where she eventually found Fong none of them would ever be able to match up with the Chinese man. A lot of them had things like bum arms and bloody noses, so apparently they were half the reason everything was as apocalyptic-looking as it was.

A sudden depression smacked her straight in the face, somehow there was a center of cool air in the middle of all the heavy and dense hot air around it. After the stumble and recovery, because she had been shielding her face with her armored arms and hadn't noticed anything strange she was about to walk into, Sonya glanced around.

There was a literal cyclone forming overhead, a lazily turning dark smudge of an ugly bruise in the sky back-lit red by the still burning Storm Flame tainted fires all around. She had made it to a dead zone at the very center, it was still hot but not oppressively so.

…okay, this was actually fucking impressive.

Fong had caused a localized storm cell to form overhead, likely not intentionally but it happened. He was powerful enough to actually exert a visible effect on the weather patterns, a single man had that kind of power. No matter what kind of opposition he faced to egg him into it, he fucked with the weather. Visibly so. Absolute, fucking, wizardry.

Everything around her was more broken than disintegrating or on fire, for once… and there were a lot more bodies about. Knocked clean out, splayed over various walls or half in and half out of the building they had been tossed bodily into, and possibly still alive just really injured.

…they were safe enough. It wasn't her problem if they got caught in the storm looming overhead.

Which… there were probably people-dust in the grit being blown about outside the center eye of this weather cell. Delightful. She was covered in people.

Sonya started walking through this little center of a ghost-town that seemed a touch out of place given the blasted-out crumbling ruin surrounding it, shaking out her clothing the best she could and helped no little amount due to the temperature differences between the two areas and the absolutely
dead air pocket she was in.

Fong wasn't dead center of the pocket, but close enough, with three still conscious others.

The Triad assassin had lost the top part of his outfit since she last saw him, only tattered remains tucked into less ragged pants were left of his entire outfit. In fact, the red Chinese dragon curling around his left shoulder and down his arm clearly visible. She didn't often see his tattoo, it was a pretty good rendition too but the man didn't often show it off. Something or someone made Fong Disintegrate half of his outfit, so… tattoo.

"Ah… Sonya. I'm not sure…" Glancing upwards, he shrugged kind of… pathetically at the situation he had found himself in.

Lucky for him, she had given some thought about this on the slog to find him, while walking through that nightmare-fodder landscape surrounding them. "There's illegally stored and smuggled chemical weapons intended for the Vietnam War stored in the area. They caught fire."

"…really?"

"No, but suggest something else to explain… that." She waved a hand overhead and then dropped it down to indicate their surrounding ring of utter destruction still churning away as things started twisting up in a mini cyclone of terrifying artificialness.

Fong tried to stuff his hands into his sleeved, belatedly recalled he didn't have sleeves anymore, so caught one wrist with his left hand and shrugged. "It's a better idea than mine."

"You planned on running for it, didn't you?"

"…well, yes."

"There always needs to be a reasonable explanation, or you risk Vindice interference. Especially if it's eye-catching. I'll plant my rumor in the right ears before we go." Ignoring the face he pulled at the Mafia Enforcers, the thief inspected the three he had isolated and restrained in a little circle back-to-back.

One was the older swaggering asshole that led the larger group in the warehouse just before she stole Nuan out of that situation. One of the others was one of said men that arrived with him… the last was someone she didn't know at all.

Sonya glanced at Fong skeptically, indicating the unknown as she could somewhat understand why he'd want the other two if Zhōng was to get to the bottom of his niece's kidnapping.

She got a fully benign and completely innocent smirk in return.

"We have to get them all the way to the wharf, and get the little Triad Princess on our way through, somehow. Without being stopped. With three locals with reputations around here. How the fuck do you plan on doing that?"

"I am more a man of action," he insisted, loosening his grip on his own wrist to examine some of the bruises just starting to darken on his forearms instead of look her, "I am not very good at the planning nor fine detail work. That's what I brought you in for."

Sonya flatly stared at the man for a long moment, until even the unfamiliar guys on the ground started shifting and squirming uneasily. Fong just finished his inspection then aimed a politely inquiring expression full of expectation at her the rest of the time she needed to order her response
"Fong, assassins are all about details. The excessively fine details. Finding that one tiny window of opportunity you have to slip into a heavily guarded area to kill one man with a method that can be reasonably excused as either natural or a freak accident, the opportunities where just straight murder is acceptable aren't actually all that often."

"I am aware, and I am working on it." He tried to reassure her with, raising both hands as if appealing for patience or peace. "I just do not have the skills in this moment. Hence, why I grabbed you out of your own guildhall. Liqin was not available… you were nearby and I know you are very exact in your work."

"How? I've done one hostage exchange thing for you, the other times I ran for it."

"You disappeared from Liqin, and he could not find you. Twice. Other assassins have targeted you, you caught one and defied all the others. Obviously, you know the skills involved to avoid them so deftly. Enough to teach and steal from a Triad using students. You bankrupted them, and the members are so shamed they returned to honest work as far away as they could get from Hong Kong instead. Therefore, yes."

…she forgot about those Three Suns guys. Galina promised to deal with the results of that whole debacle, and she had so Sonya put the topic out of mind as dealt with.

Maybe she should finally glance over her own finances, for once. Not that she didn't trust Bjørn with it, especially after a Mist ensured the poor boy would be the best money man she could get for all the money she paid Viper, but just to get a semi-shaky idea of just what she was getting in through her antics.

"…okay, I might have an idea." Or two, but she was feeling a little petty at being stuck with the 'brains of the operation' without agreeing to it so the most tricky, involved, excruciatingly long-winded idea was the one she was going to implement. "Find an intact crate. Size big enough to hold your idiots. We're shipping them express, even if I have to bribe the ricketiest, barely sea-worthy old fisherman's raft to take such a shady as fuck package to Hong Kong."

Fong, the utter idiotic lout who lucked into having the right skilled people around him when he needed it, happily wandered off to do so.

Sonya slid a dark look at the three suspiciously quiet men just watching them hold a conversation and summoned one of her axes to hand. "Now, you all can either fit in yourself… or I'll help by carving pieces off."

The older of the three very pointedly glanced upward, then shot her a completely disgusted look.

…point. That really was a lot more impressive than the threat of being carved up while still alive.

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(Lighten the 9th of November, 1970. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Little Triad Princess Nuan about elbowed Fong in the face to get free when she spotted her apparent parents, given her entirely too loud shout of such relived thankfulness that attracted all sorts of attention and her very awkward run on still injured feet to two people she had never seen before.

The niece and the father shared some features, but mom shared features with both her daughter and
apparent uncle.

"I don't believe she believed us in our claims to return her." Fong mused lightly in good humor as she sighed heavily, idly shaking out his sleeves to fall straight again after carrying the Princess from the docks to his Triad's headquarters.

The guy on door-duty snickered as he shut the heavy slab of wood behind them, drawing another sigh out of Sonya. "No shit, Sherlock."

"...who's 'Sherlock'?

"English literary story detective, buy a copy of his most famous story later." Speaking of which, she didn't think she had any of the 'classic' stories in her library... so she could steal it from him once he had the time to read it. "You want to sit in on this discussion?"

The Storm blankly looked at her in confusion.

"...right, you were out when-" Sonya shut up entirely suspiciously fast that even Alek sniffing the greenery nearby glanced at her skeptically, recalling her reasoning for not telling him this sudden out of the blue development she only noticed due to the weird reaction on the ship she noticed after six hours into the trip back. "Nevermind. You're sitting in on it, I'll explain later but I do require you to be there for the help. This is about to get... dicey."

He thought about that for a moment. "Do I need to point out I am a member of the Wo Hop To Triad?"

"That's nice, Fong. Not the issue."

Patting him awkwardly on the elbow, she knew what was going to come but there was no way it'd work out for him, the thief decided it might as well be time to get this over with so she belatedly followed the Triad Princess' path to Zhōng and the bewilderingly tiny family unit reassuring themselves their daughter/niece was overall fine.

"Her feet require medical attention, I provided first aid but as my sister is the medical professional in the family you might wish for someone more skilled to provide a second look." She reported simply once she was in range for polite conversation, pinning the Triad Head with a look as his niece was swept off her feet by her apparent father. "Additionally... may I have a word with you and your niece later, Zhōng?"

Mom wrapped her thin arms around her daughter and husband tightly, shooting Sonya an absolutely nasty look over the Princess' shoulder. "And just what-"

"Kun, peace." Zhōng interrupted, not hastily but with enough it attracted attention even if he didn't look at the other members of his immediate family. "Why?"

"Miss Nuan has a piece of white sapphire from me, have her show you inside." Sonya evaded with, because there was no way in fucking hell she was announcing the little Princess was a Sky in the middle of a fucking open-air courtyard with other Flame types obviously or not spying/eavesdropping. "I need to call my mother and a few other people... but may I suggest you move inside for that discussion?"

Sign one had been all the Flame users the older gentleman suddenly arrived at the warehouse getting into a scrap with a Storm that very obviously was too strong for them but trying to get past him anyways, sign two was Sonya actually using the Princess' name at first... sign three was the little orange sparks coming from her fingertips the girl then asked about when she reviewed the basics of
Dying Will Flames to her on the ship.

Surprise. Triad Princess was a fledgling Sky. Popped in the process of her kidnapping, some Philippine asshole who was doing the dirty work of one of her uncle's enemies decided hey… well if the opportunity was there then they could get an edge up on anyone else then Zhōng would be unable to murder them all off once he figured out they had something to do with everything.

On one hand, she could finally complete the study she started at age nine. On the other, this was incredibly ill timed.

Therefore, she had to find a way to get the first without committing the time she needed for her own work. Or committing a large block of time… without offending the head of a very large, world-wide, criminal syndicate she had actual decent interactions with.

The Triad Head very obviously didn't understand her caution for three full seconds, which probably meant she didn't have to get into the full and unabridged Flame lore history with his siblings at least if he thought announcing his niece's Flame aloud was not worth the security, but then it apparently occurred to him to wonder why she was advocating for privacy when before she hadn't bothered teaching Mingxia a couple of trick in relative public before. Once he nodded in agreement and turned to his sister and brother-in-law Sonya reached blindly behind her, and caught Fong before he wandered off on her too as apparently he didn't need to immediate confess what he set an entire major city's warehouse district on fire for just yet.

"Follow them, and ensure the Suns don't freak out."

"…why?"

"You'll find out in fifteen minutes, if not sooner, the same time everyone else will. Excuse me while I get the hell out of dodge until the hubbub is over." Fong shot her a highly confused look as she hauled her dog away from the hibiscus bush he had discreetly pissed all over while everyone else was not paying attention to him.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 9th of November, 1970 continued. Thieves' Hall, Mafia Land.)

Bjørn slowly replaced the receiver in the phone cradle once he was sure his patron had hung up, calmly moved his work to one side of his worksurface, then slammed his forehead into the laminated metal.

Thrice.

Then, once the headache settled in and his bewildered disbelief had cleared up nicely, he abandoned the half-made plan already in the works for what was left of the year and shelved all the relevant details back into the appropriate places up and down the hallway in the right rooms. Then, after destroying five days' worth of work, the Lackey abandoned the workroom and made his way up.

"I need to speak with Ser Pirbright, now." Giving a professional smile at the much older Italian man who straightened up from the secretary's desk, the Lightning-Storm then hardened his tone.

"Privately, thank you."

"Wait, you can't-

Slamming the door in the idiot's face, every thief's Lackey in the building was well aware the idiot was more there to spy than actually assist anyone the transparently creepy asshole, he added a touch
of Lightning Flames to the doorknob just as a precaution to any abrupt interruptions. "Ser Pirbright… what, exactly, are any and all rules or guidelines about Mafia Home Tutors and Mafia Land contractual workers being one in the same?"

The older man heaved an entirely disgusted sigh, one that seemed to come from his very bones. Then he also neatly put away his own work, diligently filing away what appeared to be a master ledger in one desk drawer Bjørn highly doubted he actually kept it in and the loose papers with their associated files into another on the other side.

Only then did the elderly gentleman glance up over at him fully. "That, has never come up before. Shockingly. Usually they tend to have better things to do with their time."

"My Dama intends to complete her self-imposed goal of over twenty contracts for this fiscal year, which I do not believe either of us will object to." Started the Lackey as he pulled his personal memo pad from his inner vest pocket, as that was kind of the most important part of this. That she did not intend to use the situation to shirk her commitments… but that was what he was aiming for anyway. "Being the case, I need to request access to all or some of the contracts that come through from the area or the surrounding countries when such incidents happen."

"No. Several of those contracts are intended for specific agents."

"Then any untargeted contracts."

"After five days of no takers."

"Three."

"Fine." Pirbright pulled out a clean sheet of paper and prepped a fountain pen to start documenting the negotiation and what would be his starting terms when his patron's mother called to wring yet more concessions out of him for Mafia Land making use of the Tutor suddenly working for them. "She will then need to agree to contractual negotiations to include a new specialization to her work contract."

"She will have the right of first refusal from contract alone, and as long as she is a member of the Flame Academy of Moscow as will the principal of her school."

"Required two days of in-person meeting before refusal, and only while she is formally unassigned by her principal."

Bjørn mulled that over, but the term was rather generous. Sonya had been expecting at least three days of forced meetings when she informed him of the negotiations she needed him to do on her behalf, and if she warned her mother of that detail then him getting two days before Lisa had her go would only help his reputation.

Likely, Pirbright had a follow up item he wished to use the goodwill upon.

Well, he could help a little bit if he was going to be so agreeable. "Principal Primakova will be following up on all terms before the contract will be signed by her Home Tutor and my Dama."

The head of the guildhall raised his head from the paper with only one line on it and pinned the Lightning-Storm with the ugliest look he ever received since he became a Storm-Cloud's Lackey. It just made him grin.

"Just between you and me, the Wo Hop To Triad has a new Sky, she's currently helping them figure out what to do next."
It would not be kept between Bjørn and Pirbright, he was counting on it. Sonya was counting on it, the Triad Head she was dealing with was counting on it.

Completely new Skies from nowhere were a once or twice a decade kind of thing, normally Skies were only announced from the already established lines with full arrays of Guardians already type of things from the usually favored and historically close lines. Flame users born outside of those already established lines were usually fucked when it came to any hope of Harmonization.

A new Sky line?

The Wo Hop To Triad was apparently about preparing for a full-scale war, his patron had also helpfully conveyed all the information they excitedly pressed on her in a deadpan before hanging up. Including the six historical and three less historical but certainly more recent if not exactly recently incidents about a sudden appearance of a new unexpected Sky in China she had been treated to.

She also, ever so helpfully, pointed out that with the general rise in Flame users around the world… it was highly likely there were more undiscovered Skies frolicking about with absolutely no clue and a disastrous effect on the local criminal factions without anyone having any idea at all why their Flame users were getting aggressive. Those that wouldn't have historical examples to at least try preparing to stave off the inevitable effects of such a find, and no idea where to go to get a unbonded Sky help.

A warning that it was entirely possible this incident would likely not stay a rare one-off, that this would inform a few in just where to go for help if not exactly who to ask, and an entirely unneeded implication to get shit nailed down quickly and in their favor before they were caught between a razor-sharp rock and an unforgiving hard place that he could easily read in her words.

As with any new market Bjørn needed to get into on his patron's behalf, the very first thing he required was an exit plan. Some way to retreat from whatever market or subject without censure. Already secured, even if Pirbright had yet to record it down.

Now it was time to secure the benefits and get what he could with what leverage was left over after getting the basics covered.

The Lackey took a seat as the older man finally wrote down that one detail he had been deliberating over, then reached behind him for the decanter of amber liquid on the shelves behind his desk. Two glasses were then pulled from the deepest drawer in the man's desk, a measure poured in both, and Pirbright saluted him with it before knocking back the entire tumbler.

Bjørn chose to sip his and figured out it was a whisky. Really, really smooth whisky.

The head of the thieves' guild poured himself another few fingers, put the glass stopper back into the decanter but put it on the desk instead of back on the shelf, and picked up his pen again. "Upon the completion of her current work contract, there will need to be further renegotiations with a designated Mafia Land agent specializing in unique skills of our residents. Unless, of course... you would prefer to keep everything condensed and contained by renegotiations with myself instead."

Another sip, and the Lightning-Storm had to agree. If Pirbright wanted the bonus for negotiating then he could have it, he didn't have any other contact with the administrative ranks of the island who would like a nice surplus of cash. "I'll sound out my Dama about such an arrangement, but do not foresee a problem."

This, for some reason, earned him a faintly squinty-eyed inspection.
"Let's try that again, with three hundred percent less stupid." Sonya very flatly announced into the ringing silence, the polearm held less than a fraction of a centimeter under the Incense Master's tightly closed jaw. "I am not volunteering as the Princess' Mafia Home Tutor. I am volunteering my time so you have the time to deliberate over offers for who teaches the little Sky what she needs to know as one. All I can offer is the basics and an inclusion to my Flame-focus study as the Sky on record for testing, which would come with the obvious free focus gems once we have one. I, as one half of a set of Guardian Prospects, am mostly numb to any Sky's influence. You're not getting me as a Cloud Guardian. End of story."

Fong tucked his hands back into his sleeves after throwing out two very loud-mouthed Flame users who had thoughtlessly tried to rush the thief from the back, determinedly wondering just who her soul-twinned fellow might be.

It was usually siblings that tended to share such a strong bond that even Skies had to obtain both or have neither, but Sonya put a claim on three different Flame types. Cloud, Storm, and Sun.

She also had three siblings. It was an interesting question to contemplate for a few seconds, for he knew she did share something with her sister and if her claim on Sun was true it could imply something interesting.

His Mountain Master ignored his Incense Master's plight, the fact Fong had thrown out the Straw Sandal and the Red Pole officers on their ears and was now attempting to loom to the best of his ability to keep the peace in the meeting room, and the muttering as the few others that helped him keep a hold on a main branch of a Triad without any major logistical issues couldn't help but gossip between them.

Then their leader glanced at his niece sitting slightly behind and to his right. "Nuan, would you like a general overview before an instructor is found or would you prefer searching for an instructor be an immediate commitment?"

The young, painfully new Sky glanced up from her lap and her hands clasped together there momentarily, glancing from her uncle to the woman standing bold as brass holding one of his officers at weapon-point to keep him silent. She immediately returned her gaze to her hands, but now Fong could semi-sense in a new and interesting way her attentions turned more inward with how the feeling decreased yet thickened ever so slightly.

Physically controlling his urge to do something because of that sensation, a very undisciplined impulse that was easily squashed now he knew what to watch for, the Storm pumped out more of his Flames in the air to give the young woman a greater buffer from the less self-controlled Flame users around her practically throwing off sparks unintentionally from every movement.

He figured out the trick with seven words from Sonya about how no one noticed Nuan's Flames when being carried by him through the streets of Hong Kong and only half an hour after it was revealed she was a new Sky and he was impressed to keep the Sun sought to heal her feet from smothering her. The fact the thief refrained from doing the same trick even if she knew it was fully possible elected a very interesting mix of envy/irritation/jealousy/anger/appreciation he could not always suppress as unworthy.

Belatedly realizing the same fact she obviously had from the moment she realized the girl was a
Sky… had hurt. Fong was a strong Storm, he had usually found it interesting that he could always burn more away than any other Storm he ever met. Sometimes he would allow another Flame user to try to hold a visible Flame outside their body against his ability to do the same. He always won.

Nuan was not a particularly powerful Sky. He easily overwhelmed her Flames without effort or noticing her type for more than a full day.

Fong was too strong… and he did not have the ‘numbness' Sonya claimed to Sky Flames. There was no point obeying the impulses Nuan's Flames teased in his, he could barely feel it to begin with unless paying specific attention and she likely would never be able to do more than brush against him with her Flames in the end.

It made him feel somewhat hollow. To see and be paying attention, to almost fully feel a Sky's influence… but being unable to fully join the excited thrill every other Flame user in the Wo Hop To Triad headquarters felt when the rumor finally broke into the open.

"This guy doesn't have great self-control, Zhōng."

"I see your point, Miss Bazanova." Mused the Mountain Master conversationally, as if they were not waiting out his niece's preoccupation and thoughts and his Incense Master's small trickle of blood down his neck was indefinitely more pressing and interesting. "Then again, it seems a fair number of men I had higher expectations of are failing to contain themselves."

The thief, still holding an inhumanly still weapon made purely of Cloud Flame Propagated metal being balanced against a less statue-like human, had the gall to look semi-contemplative for someone that disappeared for the initial uproar she knew full well was coming. "It is a uniquely rare occurrence."

Fong's leader narrowly stared at the woman standing before him. "You do not sound as if your words should apply to this situation."

"…if you track the world-wide numbers of Flame users and extrapolate the rate, we're increasing in every type. Even with idiots hunting brand new Flame users to add to their collections some years ago, and the incidental deaths as panic kills off a handful more here or there, there are more and more Flame users active and wandering around than even three years before. Ten years before. There's more Skies, limitedly less compared to the other types but there's even more and more of every type so there statistically has to be other Skies, we just don't find them somehow." She rethought her words for a long, frozen second. "Or someone else already has, several of them, and they just do not say so for reasons."

…he hadn't actually realized that. Nuan might not be Fong's Sky, but that did not mean there was no Sky that would be able to endure his Storm Flames without splintering apart and being barely able to affect him.

Perhaps he had outsmarted himself signing a contract with Mafia Land. He could continue to look for a stronger Sky, if this hollow/jealous sensation persisted beyond his attendance as Nuan's temporary bodyguard until she found her first few Guardians.

"An interesting suggestion."

"Statistics. Just basic math taken to extremes. Historical patterns, if there was a century-long ‘dip' in the number of Flame users… there would be a ‘rise' in them as well. I used the pattern to prepare the Zolotovs against the surge of Flame users in Moscow, where the ‘dip' basically wiped out the last of them before the numbers started to climb again. There was suddenly three of us in the city when I
was nine, then seven before I was twelve… then fifty-some number of dumbass kids able to set themselves on fire by the time I was sixteen. Now some hundred or so in the entire west side of Moscow alone, and I'm nineteen."

Zhōng blinked slowly, taken aback but self-controlled enough very few would be able to see it in him. "You... are younger than my niece."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Sonya demanded in return.

"Nothing."

She considered that, utterly unbothered that their conversation had redirected most attention to her instead of the brand new Sky's internal deliberations as likely intended. Until Nuan tugged on her uncle's sleeves near the elbow to gain his attention to give her answer in what privacy their closeness allowed.

Fong obeyed the sweeping gesture he was then given, implacably and politely removing everyone else from the room. Even if he physically had to throw them out, leaving the Incense Master for last because Sonya was being very polite in not moving a bit so he couldn't do anything like trying to run for it and evade him to remain.

"What, is going on?" Demanded the young Sky the moment it was finally only the four of them left, shoving both hands through her hair and pulling her heels out from under her. "Everyone, no matter who they are or how 'important' they seem, why do they suddenly care? I've seen these men before, most had ignored me or avoided me…"

"Sky Attraction. It's ugly, but there's literally nothing in your Flames that discourages it." Immediately responded the thief, balancing the shaft of her weapon behind her neck and on her shoulders as she remained standing. "Comparing you to the three Skies I know and have spoken to in Italy, it'll never go away completely. But, with either enough experience or with a full set of Guardians it will ebb to be less... distracting."

Nuan tiredly shut her eyes. "I would appreciate you staying nearby for a time, Miss Sonya. You and Master Fong. I would rather have someone nearby interested more in my well-being than my apparent 'effects' to the point they blindly reinvent past incidents in their own favor to ensure I am not blindly walking into my own hell."

"I still have to work, so I'll be in and out depending. Fong likely won't be going anywhere, and you can entirely and completely safely hide behind him too. In fact, I highly recommend you don't go anywhere without one or both of us for the next few weeks. Let's keep the kidnapping attempts to just the one." Sonya considered the apparently older woman thoughtfully, until she glanced up in the pause. "This is probably the worse part. You are at the least 'Harmonious' you'll ever be, the only way forward from here is up. The more Guardians you get, the less everyone will act like moronic idiots around you... but that will likely never go away entirely."

"Can't we just pretend this never happened?"

"...I know a few people."

Snorting bitterly at the seemingly flippant retort, Nuan was about as startled as Fong felt and Zhōng appeared when the Russian woman's features didn't change a fraction.

"You think I'm joking, I'm not." Sonya needlessly explained herself flatly. "I can entirely enable such if you really insist, but you need to realize that while you can change the situation... maybe even
stave things off for a year or two, in the end it'll come out again anyways if you don't know what you're doing well enough to stop it. Then you'll be far away from home, in who knows what situation, without any help whatsoever. The possibility you'll be grisly murdered rises the less support you have, by someone who won't know who or what you are... to even your prospective Guardians getting entirely too out of hand without supervision or a reason to obey your refusal."

"Sonya-

"Miss Bazanova-

"Entirely possible a Mist will try to offer to make themselves a 'hero' or 'suitable protector' if she's this unhappy with this. Either now, or later, eventually she's going to realize she can try to run." Entire unbothered by their censure, the Storm-Cloud released her control on her weapon and took a seat directly in the middle of the floor. "So yes, it's possible. But it's a completely stupid idea when time will alter the very thing she's so unhappy with, and why should be made clear instead of just telling her 'no'. And I charge for the second kidnapping rescue, by the way."

Fong noticed a movement in the air currents behind him, glancing over his shoulder while his Mountain Master and the blonde stared each other down. Then he glanced down, at the entirely unapologetic white dog wiggling through the cracked open sliding door from the suspiciously empty hallway beyond. He kicked the animal back into the hallway, because Alek would've just chewed through the wood if it was the thief's animal companion.

He watched the dog do it twice, after all.

Regardless if the door was open a slight bit or not, the thief's dog would eat his way through it just to show how impossible it was to keep him away from his mistress.

The puff of Mist Flames attracted no attention from the others and proved his suspicions right.

"If you actually kick my dog, Fong, I'm skinning you alive." Sonya announced over a shoulder, not looking away from making her point to both uncle and niece about her brutally honest policy.

"Of course.” He needed to pass on a warning or two about closed doors around that animal…

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(Tuesday the 17th of November, 1970. Kemayoran International Airport, Jakarta, Island of Java, Republic of Indonesia.)

Skull obligingly shook yet another hand nearly thrust into his face. "I'll see you when I see you next, yeah?"

The magician's very lovely assistant ignored the politely offered hand and threw herself over him for a hug and two smacking kisses to both cheek. "You are so silly, chérie."

Clément the magician, and more importantly her husband, rolled his eyes when he very pointedly kept his hands above her shoulders and open. "We used the opportunity to get a full-paid honeymoon out of things, but we're going home to France in less than a month. I believe we'll probably be seeing you shortly."

…right, 'Skull's' nationality on record was French.

With a laugh, he gave both a good-natured grin to distract them or anyone else from possibly guessing that wasn't actually the case. "I've got family to visit before that once the tour ends, and I've got to do something about all the promotional things my sister said I could store at her place. So it
Marie just sighed gustily at him, as if failing to mention that was some great tragedy. She also did not release the stuntman for five full seconds. "Next year then. Don't be a stranger, Skull."

"Take care Marie, Clément. Enjoy the rest of your honeymoon!" He called after them, waving his now free hand as the magician and assistant left the harbor's little customs building as a few other of the acts chipped in their own farewells. Once they were well on his way he turned back, easily spotting Mauricio taking advantage of the waiting to patch his seriously awesome multicolored coat. "What are you going to do afterwards, anyways?"

The portly and admittedly a bit short Spaniard adjusted which angle he was stitching the garment from, pulling the needle and thread from his mouth to apply and clean up a rent in the sheer fabrics. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Last leg of the tour and all, we're flying out to West Germany? From there, we're firmly be back in Europe until the end of this thing. " Throwing his lanky arms over the back of the bench where all their things were either piled or other members of the tour were taking advantage to nap on, Skull tilted his head back to the windows behind them all and the airplanes getting refueled or boarded. "I wouldn't suggest you go back to or split at Hungary, but... once past there?"

"Wasn't the arrangement 'until you became famous'?' Teased the Rain mildly, smirking the entire time even if he had to be nervous about getting within a stone's throw to where he very nearly 'disappeared' altogether. "I do not believe I am that kind of miracle maker, Skull."

"Naw, you're just the idiot savant. Viper's that kind of miracle maker." When his hype man very threateningly held up his little sliver of a needle, he just had to laugh. "Okay. But seriously? Do you intend to hang around more, or meet up with your guys?"

Mauricio bit off the excess string, tugging at the garment to be absolutely sure his mending would hold before starting to pack away his mending kit. "I highly doubt they stayed together, Skull. Those kinds of acts just... accumulate in force when someone charismatic enough pulls them together to pool money and resources to leave one area and travel to another. I was not such a man, in fact we left our glue behind to desperately try to save Aziz. It will be interesting to see who all meets back up in that pub in Ipswitch... but I do not hold out much hope."

...yeah, but. Six months to meet up randomly in a pub in England was also a bit of a stretch for a bunch of people that 'only' worked together for a time. Skull was pretty positive everyone would show back up, staying together to save someone's life left a mark on people.

"After, I suggest highly you find Glen to give you a tour of the US." Skull suggested a lot more seriously, shrugging when he was pinned with a strange look. "Seriously, if you're not going to keep on hanging out with me that's probably the next best place you can go."

"You would let me go?"

"If you don't want the work...?" He could handle his own act, beyond the calling places about if he could hold a show at their place and/or setting up for his act in time it was just being excited to do stunts for a living and he was entirely beyond excited to be living the dream. "Not that I don't appreciate your help on this, Mauricio. It has been, and will continue to be until the end, fun. But, a year was the arrangement. Nearly there now. So what's next for the great magician Ciceron?"

The Rain tiled his own head back, somewhat blindly staring up at the ceiling overhead. "I... have
recently concluded I am not that great of a magician, Skull. Clément is a great magician, Roy and Siegfried are great magicians, I had one impressive trick. Without which I am little better than a street performer."

…well, that was unnecessarily harsh. "I am more than certain you've spent some time refreshing your little bag of tricks, Mauricio. I've seen you at it."

A wry twist to his mouth, and the Spaniard revealed a set of playing cards tucked into his 'work vest'. A two of hearts was flashed at him, then it was shuffled into the stack and pulled out on top again all one-handed. He then sighed tiredly. "Indeed. All summer to master this little trick, I have half of another to master yet… and I still lack a 'finale'. A pièce de résistance. Without my mirrors…"

"So long as they're normal mirrors, or just planes of glass, I don't see why you can't use your old act." Just as long as he stopped using Tranquility for the frost. "There's a lot of really interesting effect you can do with just science, man. Get yourself some dry ice. Or some actual ice. You've got the funds now to experiment, or you should if you haven't gambled all of it away by now."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Punching him in the arm, the Rain pretended supreme offense to hide the spark of mad genius that just suddenly occurred to him. "Ruffian, scoundrel, you absolute-"

"Plonker?" Skull suggested, as he had also been called that the last time they played a hand of cards with those Irish guys. "Lickarse?"

Mauricio looked him dead in the eye. "May an long dai cham mui."

"…wait, what?" The man cracked up, along with no few others in the waiting area who knew whatever language that had been, and Skull pouted. "You all are mean."

**End Notes**

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pIc-jRAh108MCCqSjSI0ILPGHUCVrtZH?usp=sharing

That's the link for the Sims3 Castle Build. If you view it, try to keep in mind I didn't bother to make it accurate to the shape of the castle I can get because of the limitations in the Sims3 architecture. There's a lot you can do with it, and a whole lot that you can't, but it's a good placeholder. There's a couple pictures of the actual castle, from the Lionard real estate site, to compare with.

**Works inspired by this one**

[(PODFIC) Russian Roulette: Reloaded by QuinsValoria, Vixen_Tail, Russian Roulette Fanart by YazzyFic](#)

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